



JADE SHARDS

FONDA LEE

Jade Shards

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INTRODUCTION

PARTWAY THROUGH writing *Jade Legacy*, I began to eagerly anticipate and dread the end of the Green Bone Saga. I'd spent a lot of time in Janloon with the Kaul family—more than six years of my life and nearly three decades of theirs. I knew these fictional people as well as anyone I knew in real life, and as much as I looked forward to completing the trilogy and moving on to new projects, I was reluctant to say goodbye. I'd put these characters through so much, had watched them age and evolve, and as they neared the end of their story, I found myself nostalgic for their youth, wishing to revisit an earlier time in their lives.

Lan, Hilo, Shae, Anden, Wen, Ayt Mada—all of these characters first appear on the pages of *Jade City* with a great deal of existing personal history. I began writing short stories about their past purely for my own enjoyment, simply so I could spend more time with them, experiencing early events that were mentioned but never depicted in the books. Then I figured, why not share these stories with readers? I'd posted three of them to Patreon when Bill Schafer at Subterranean Press suggested publishing them as a beautiful, limited-edition collection, and that was, as they say, an offer I couldn't refuse.

The Green Bone Saga is, first and foremost, the story of a family dynasty. Many people have asked me about my inspirations for the series, from epic fantasy to wuxia fiction, crime dramas to kung fu, the deliberate exploration of themes such as postcolonial modernization, globalization, cultural diaspora, and Cold War geopolitics. Inevitably, I'm asked about the influence of *The Godfather*, and my answer is always that my appreciation for Puzo's book and Coppola's films comes not from the fact that the characters are gangsters, but the fact that they are a family (who happen to be gangsters).

The Kauls live a far more perilous and violent existence than most of us, yet they were so real and relatable to me that at times during the writing

I felt as much a family biographer as a novelist. The term *epic fantasy* conjures an expectation of vast continents, kingdoms and armies, the rise and fall of nations. But there is also an epic scale to be found in a single life. In the seasons of a marriage. In seeing one's children grow into adulthood. In passing hopes and dreams, as well as burdens and sorrows from one generation down to another. I will always be thankful that this trilogy was my breakout work. Before the Green Bone Saga, I would've described myself as a science fiction and fantasy author who delivered cool worldbuilding and exciting action scenes. These books are how I discovered I'm a character writer. Seeing readers fall in love with these fictional people, as I have, has been one of my greatest professional satisfactions.

Although the four stories in this collection take place before the events of *Jade City* and are presented in chronological order, with "The Witch and Her Friend" beginning twenty-five years before the start of the trilogy, and "Granddaughter Cormorant" occurring three and half years prior, they assume familiarity with the world and the characters and are best enjoyed after having read at least *Jade City* if not the complete trilogy.

A beautiful thing about stories is that they exist forever suspended in time. Opening a book transports you instantly to the time and place on the page. It's easy to turn back the clock on the years, to flip to page one and begin the journey all over again. It turns out I wasn't quite done with the Kaul family after all. But perhaps, they are done with me. After everything tragic and triumphant they've been through, they deserve their rest.

THE WITCH AND HER FRIEND

THE NEW student was thirteen years old, a thin, unhealthy-looking girl with long fingers and large feet. She was too old to begin training; any of the instructors at Wie Lon Temple School would've said so. But not only had the gangly orphan scored off the charts on the basic entrance tests for jade tolerance and aptitude, she was now suddenly, *inexplicably*, the daughter of the national hero Ayt Yugontin. The admissions office had made an exception for Ayt Madashi.

"Look at her. A poor village peasant among all these Janlooners," remarked Aun Uremayada, not with derision or meanness, merely the curious interest and faintly revolted compassion that one might feel toward a three-legged dog.

Wie Lon Temple School, in the first year after its postwar reconstruction on a new campus outside of Janloon, consisted of six hundred students, divided into three cohorts—Lower Years, Middle Years, and Upper Years. The new girl, Ayt Mada, was the oldest student in the class of entry-level pupils consisting mostly of ten- to twelve-year-olds.

Aun Ure was sixteen, the youngest student among the Upper Years, yet there was no trainee in the school with greater status. Seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds saluted her as a senior. Instructors called upon her to demonstrate techniques. Unlike today, when minors in Kekon are not permitted to wear jade without adult supervision, when Aun Ure was at Wie Lon, she openly wore her family jade everywhere she went, and no one ever forgot that she'd earned every piece of green around her throat and ankles.

Ure left her group of friends enjoying the spring warmth on the lawn and went to sit next to the new girl on one of the wooden benches in the courtyard of the main training hall. Beyond the courtyard, a chain-link fence

prevented students from wandering onto the northern half of the campus, which was still under construction. “Hello,” Ure said, with a friendly smile.

The younger girl looked up from her lunch bowl. The food at the school was nothing special—plain rice or noodles, pickled vegetables, sometimes a bit of shredded meat or a steamed bun—but Ure noticed that the newcomer wolfed every scrap as if it was the last meal she would see. It must be a habit that came from spending years in an orphanage, Ure thought.

“My name’s Aun Uremayada,” Ure said. “What’s yours?”

The girl eyed her. “Madashi.” She had a faintly lilting provincial accent.

“*Ayt* Madashi,” Ure reminded her. “*Ayt* is a famous and powerful name.”

The girl set aside her empty lunch bowl. She tugged on her freshly shorn hair, fidgeted in her starched new uniform. “It doesn’t suit me. Everyone knows that name, but no one knows me.”

Ure made a dismissive noise; she’d had so many aliases in her short life already, she’d lost count. “All the more reason to use it to your advantage. Think of how many people would give anything to be an *Ayt*. The name is yours now, and don’t let anyone forget it.”

Ayt Mada crossed her arms over her thin chest and regarded Ure with an uncertain expression of hopefulness and caution, as if trying to determine whether the older girl was truly a potential friend, or if the social overture was being made out of pity, or as some sort of stunt, an offering to be quickly snatched away.

Behind them, Ure could sense the inquisitive gazes and whispers of other students who were watching her interaction with *Ayt* Yu’s baffling new charity case. The Spear of Kekon, the generous man that he was, had adopted two boys along with the girl and declared an intention to give them all a martial education. Presumably one of the sons might become his heir. As for the older girl? No one knew what to make of her. The unexpected friendship of Aun Uremayada was something that would improve the newcomer’s status at Wie Lon overnight, perhaps even more so than the sponsorship of the famous *Ayt* Yugontin.

To Ure, the new girl seemed markedly different from the other children of elite Green Bone families that had worn jade for generations. Coarse and alone, yet unafraid. Armored in the equanimity of a survivor who had

already been through far worse in her life so far. Even with only one piece of mediocre-quality school-issued beginner's training jade on a plain leather band, the girl's nascent jade aura, to someone as jade sensitive as Aun Ure, was interesting—a dense, distinctive red glow.

“Aun is a famous name, too,” Mada said slowly. She pointed to Ure's jade choker, careful not to offend by touching it. “Why do *you* still need to be here? You already have your own jade.”

Ure was accustomed to the question. She leaned back on her arms. “I like school.”

It was true. She was surprisingly content with the easy, peaceful life she'd fallen into since the war had ended. She enjoyed the friendships she'd made with the other students, the illusion that she was now a normal child with an ordinary upbringing. Her ability in Channeling was equal or above that of any of the instructors at Wie Lon, but there was still plenty to learn of the other jade disciplines. The future was as unknown as ever—but in a safe and promising way, not a violent and terrifying one.

Mada took in this answer. Despite the skepticism on her face, she sat forward with interest. “I hear the Shotarians called you a witch.” Her stare was fixed and steady, and she spoke without any apparent concern that her words might insult the other girl. “Is it true that no one else can Channel like you?”

Ure couldn't help feeling a swell of pride at the possibility that Mada might've heard such a thing from her father, that Ayt Yugontin himself might've mentioned her reputation. “Shotarians are weak and superstitious,” she replied with a polite shrug. “I'm sure there must be Green Bones who can Channel better than a girl like me, I just haven't met any myself.”

Ure was a prodigy from a family of prodigies. Her father, her uncles, and her older brothers had all been Green Bones in the One Mountain Society, and some of them had given their lives fighting the Shotarian occupation. Their names were spoken with reverence alongside the great resistance leaders like Ayt Yugontin and Kaul Seningtun. All the men in her family had begun training with jade at a young age. Ure had shown no less aptitude than her brothers and been given the same early start. This was a time of war and men were dying left and right. The resistance needed every Green Bone it could produce.

Women could be especially useful. Ure was thirteen years old when she was sent on her first mission for the One Mountain Society. The Many Nations War was at its peak, and while Shotar maintained its grip over the island of Kekon, there were reasons for the rebels to hope. Overseas defeats demonstrated fissures in the foreigners' war machine, suggested that the tide was turning.

A prominent Shotarian official who regularly hosted social events for members of the occupation government was reputed to bring underage girls to his residence. Arrangements were made for Ure to be offered to him as a virgin charm girl. Carrying jade hidden under her tongue and in her undergarments, she was brought into the man's house. If her identity as an operative of the One Mountain Society was discovered, she would be raped and tortured before being executed.

That night, she killed six people—the Shotarian man, his bodyguard, his wife, two sons, and another visiting Shotarian official—all without leaving a mark on their bodies.

Over the next year and a half, she was sent on other secretive missions, given more jade to carry out other murders. The only other assassin as feared by the enemy and as celebrated by the rebels was a young man in his twenties, whose sense of Perception was said to be as astonishingly good as Ure's Channeling. Even the Kekonese began to call Ure a witch out of admiration, because her abilities seemed almost supernatural, beyond what an ordinary Green Bone could do.

The final defeat of the Shotarians, their withdrawal from Kekon, and the end of the Many Nations War occurred when she was fifteen years old. The snowballing sequence of historic events was a disruption to Ure's entire life, an inversion of everything she'd ever known. Seemingly overnight, the Shotarian soldiers were gone. Green Bones walked openly on the streets and were saluted by Lantern Men wherever they went. Her family's name was in the newspapers, not as wanted criminals, but as heroes. Ure had trained all her life in secret camps, carrying her jade under her clothes like a thief, always fearing for her life and the lives of her relatives. Now she was legally considered a child again and sent to school where children were supposed to go, instead of into the company of enemies she was tasked with killing.

Looking at the new girl, Ure thought that out of everyone at Wie Lon Temple School, perhaps Ayt Madashi felt as much as Ure did that her life

had been turned upside down, in a fortunate but nonetheless scary and discomfiting way.

Yet the girl did not seem afraid. She leaned forward, insistent. “Show me.”

Ure was often asked to demonstrate her abilities. She’d grown to find it tiresome, but for some reason, she didn’t refuse Mada. She sat up and pointed. “Do you see that bird over there?”

A sparrow was hopping along the ground roughly ten meters away, searching for crumbs dropped by students eating outdoors. When Mada nodded, Ure focused her breath, gathering her jade energy inward as if coiling a spring. With a flick of the wrist, she sent a tight, precise pulse of Channeling flying as straight and true as an arrow. The bird fluttered up wildly for a second before dropping to the gravel, dead.

Mada did not make a sound, but her eyes widened and her aura swelled with surprise. Ure laughed, pleased at the reaction she’d elicited. She had a feeling the new girl was more cynical than her thirteen years, hard to impress. But even trainees brand new to jade knew that Channeling was arguably the hardest discipline to master. Sending one’s own energy into another living being required superb control in addition to being in contact with, or at least very close, to one’s opponent. Most Green Bones Channeling from a distance of ten meters could only hope to stun a large target.

Ure tapped the single piece of jade on the training band around Mada’s wrist. “It doesn’t matter who you were before,” she said encouragingly. “It doesn’t matter that you’re a girl, or an orphan, or that you’re not from Janloon. As long as you have jade and can use it, you can do anything.”

Ure had always admired Ayt Yugontin, the man who’d personally sent her on many missions during the war. It didn’t occur to her to think that Ayt had done so knowing he might be condemning a teenage girl to an unspeakable fate. She was a member of the Aun family; it was her destiny to be a Green Bone warrior, and it was an honor to be chosen for such dangerous tasks. Surely, the Pillar of the Mountain clan would be pleased if an older student were to befriend his adoptive daughter and look after her.

Mada’s wary standoffishness evaporated. She lowered her gaze humbly, touching her forehead in salute. When she spoke this time, it was with respect and an eagerness verging on desperation. “Sister Ure, can you teach

me what you know? If I study and practice hard enough with jade, could I do what you do?"

"Not likely," Ure said honestly. She touched the stones around her neck, each piece marking a life taken in the fight for Kekon's freedom. She'd killed men before her first kiss, before her first period, before she'd been old enough to question what she hoped for in a life after the seemingly endless war. "But even so, I'll help you and be your big sister at Wie Lon from now on, how about that?" Ure stood and waved goodbye to her new friend. "We Green Bone girls have to stick together after all."



"**YOU'RE THE NEW** graduate, and I'm still your big sister, so don't even think of trying to pay," Ure insisted, slipping the waiter enough bills to cover the meal before Mada could reach for her purse. "And don't say anything about us being in Mountain clan territory, either. You may be the Pillar's daughter, but you have university expenses to think of, and I know your brothers are hardly shy about spending money."

Mada sat back with a reluctantly defeated smile. "I can't win against you." She refilled both of their teacups from the pot on the low table. A heavy summer downpour drummed the windows, but the inside of the Royal Lotus Teahouse & Restaurant was warm and relaxed, and the two women were among the few remaining customers late on a Secondday evening. "It's been much too long, Sister Ure."

Ure sighed apologetically. "It has. But life has been busy for both of us in all the best of ways, hasn't it?" She gestured in congratulations at the jade on Mada's forearms, half a dozen brilliantly green pieces mounted on a pair of new, elegantly wrought silver bracelets.

In truth, Ure was understating the matter. She could barely recognize the prickly, underfed girl she'd first met six years ago. By the time Ure had left Wie Lon, Ayt Mada had put muscle on her bones, gained several inches in height, moved up three grades, and entirely lost her soft rural accent. Ure had not paid her old school friend much attention until four months ago, when she'd heard that Ayt's adopted daughter had graduated second in her class.

Seeing Mada now, Ure thought she seemed older than her nineteen years, already a young woman instead of a teenager, wearing a fashionable but conservative pleated green skirt and a shirt with crisp white lapels. She looked and sounded every bit a native Janlooner and clan scion. No wonder Ayt Yugontin was willing to send his precocious adoptee to university, to begin grooming her for the business side of the clan.

Mada adjusted her bracelets self-consciously, then stilled her hands. “My father asks after you,” she mentioned. “He wants to know if you’re doing well. I told him that you are.” She gazed at Ure with a searching, concerned expression. “Are you, Ure-jen?”

Ure sipped her tea, enjoying the subtle citrus notes in the flavor. “Mada, of course I am,” she answered without reservation. “Angus and I are getting married. After we have children, we’re planning to move to Espenia so we’ll be close to his family. Our children will have dual citizenship.”

Mada’s return smile was surprisingly tight. “You’re already thinking of children.”

“Not right away, but soon.” A familiar prickle of defensiveness was rising into Ure’s shoulders. She’d hoped that out of everyone, her old school friend at least would be happy for her, but the skepticism and concern in Mada’s expression remained unchanged and was hard to ignore. The smile faded from Ure’s face as she set down her teacup. “I know what you’re thinking,” she said curtly. “You’re wondering why I would want to marry a foreigner and move away and have mixed-blood children who might not even be able to wear jade. That’s what everyone in the Green Bone community thinks.” The Auns were a well-known family, after all, and their withering disapproval of her decision was no secret.

Mada shook her head, eyes narrowing. “The Green Bone community has too many nattering old men who still haven’t come to grips with the fact that the war is over and the world is much bigger than what they know.” The corners of her mouth curled. “You of all people have no need for their opinions.”

Ure laughed, the tension in her back draining away as quickly as it had gathered. “You’re right. It’s hard to remember that, sometimes. I’m sorry for assuming you’d be anything like them.” Seeing Mada with new jade, looking so well put together, so much a paragon of the clan, she’d forgotten the other woman had not always been so shiny, that she’d come to Janloon as a

war orphan and knew what it felt like to be friendless and judged. “I may be leaving some things behind,” Ure admitted, “but who knows what’s ahead? My children will have an overseas education and maybe they’ll grow up to become something even better than Green Bones.”

“As long as you’re happy, I’m happy for you,” Mada said sincerely. “If I seemed anxious or disappointed, it’s only because I was hoping you would consider my father’s request.” She paused. “He wants to know if you might do some work for the Mountain clan again.”

Before Ure could say a word, Ayt’s daughter held up a forestalling hand, asking the other woman to hear her out. “Our Fists and Fingers have their hands full these days trying to put down the gangs that have been causing so much trouble in Janloon. Too many of the criminals are willing to risk the Itches to wear jade, so the city police are useless against them. It’s up to Green Bones to patrol the streets and ensure public safety, but despite dividing up responsibility for protecting districts between our clan and Kaul Seningtun’s people, we’re still badly stretched.” Mada’s eyes dropped to the jade encircling Ure’s neck and rested there before rising back to her face. “Even after all these years, people remember you as the Witch of the One Mountain Society. They know what you’re capable of as a Green Bone. You could be a great help.”

There had been a time when the Spear of Kekon personally asking her to carry out a mission would’ve made Ure jump to obey without hesitation, happy to risk her life for the Pillar. That had been a long time ago. She had been a girl without anything in her life that couldn’t be risked.

Ure fingered the three layers of jade beads around her throat, but she shook her head. From now on, she would rather make life with Angus than take it from others. “Please give your father my deepest respect and continued loyalty,” she said, “but I’m done with all that, Mada.”

Mada was silent for a long moment. “How can you be *done* being a Green Bone?” she asked, with childlike bewilderment, reminding Ure that her friend was still a teenager, after all. Mada’s voice dropped but her words gained speed and force. “At Wie Lon, you were untouchable, already a war hero, the best Green Bone among us. On the first day we met, I saw you Channel into a sparrow from across a courtyard. The gods favored you with ability that others can only dream of. Don’t you want to *use* it? To see just how far you can go, what you can do?”

Ure thought, unkindly, *I was a killer a dozen times over when you were still a barefoot little orphan girl in some nameless, bombed-out village.* Ayt Mada was still new to the power of jade, the tyrannical bonds of the clan, the weight of a dynastic family name. She was still learning to be a Green Bone and to be an Ayt. She radiated a youthful, desperate ambition. Ure did not envy her.

I don't want my children to have a witch as a mother. "Maybe one day you'll understand," she said.

Mada's stare was surprisingly cold. "I don't think I will."

"You graduated in second place in your class at Wie Lon," Ure said. "How did you fall behind Tanku Din in the last month of school when you'd been ahead of him until then?"

Mada's body remained still, but her dense jade aura shifted like a beast under a blanket. "He did well in the final Trials," she said stiffly. "Everyone knows Tanku-jen is an extremely talented Green Bone."

"Not as talented as you," Ure said simply and without a drop of flattery. "But he's the son of the Horn, destined to rise on the military side of the clan. You're the Pillar's daughter by adoption, but your place will be on the business side under the Weather Man. Your father spoke to you, didn't he? He mentioned how important it is for the clan's warriors to have confidence in the Tanku family, and for the Ayts and the Tankus to get along." The stony expression on Mada's face would've confirmed the suspicion even if Ure didn't easily perceive the angry bristle of her old friend's heavy jade aura. Ure said, with regretful smugness, "There's a cost to every decision we make, Mada, but the further we go for the clan, the more we give. You should remember that. Ask yourself: How far are you willing to go?"

Mada asked, "Does Angus know who you really are?"

It was Ure's turn to stiffen. At what point in this friendly, long overdue reunion between former schoolmates had the conversation turned into a contest? Mada was younger than she was. At school, Ure had always been in the higher position. She shouldn't feel any need to answer a teenager's intrusive questions, yet she spoke before she could think otherwise. "He can see that I wear jade, and he knows I come from a jade-wearing family. He has some idea of what that means." She was gratified by her own calm confidence. "Enough of an idea anyway. I wouldn't expect him to understand everything, but we don't need to know every detail of each other's past to be able to build a future together."

An awkward silence extended between the two women, punctuated only by the muted sounds of servers clearing dishes and the jingle of the door chime as late diners departed. Then Mada retreated; her posture relaxed and she dipped her chin, a conciliatory smile appearing on her young but carefully schooled features. Her voice softened, yet was more distant than before. “It’s my turn to apologize if I’ve said anything to offend you, Sister Ure. I’m only an inexperienced university student after all. The Pillar will be disappointed that you’re not willing to return as a warrior of the clan, but you’re right—we shouldn’t let ourselves be flattened by pressure from anyone else.”

Mada looked at her watch as if surprised by the lateness of the hour. She gathered her purse and began to stand, casually and briskly. “I’ll always be grateful for the friendship you showed me at Wie Lon. Even if it means you move away and we won’t be able to see each other very often from now on, I hope with all my heart that the gods shine favor on you, whatever path you take in the future.”

Ure returned the smile, and they stood and exited the restaurant together. The downpour had stopped, but the wet sidewalks were dark and shimmered with reflected streetlight. The women embraced outside the teahouse, but there was an uncomfortable lack of warmth in the parting, their jade auras brushing up against each other like heavy cloaks drawn tightly around their shoulders. Ure felt an unsettled, ominous sensation in the pit of her stomach, a certainty that this was the moment when their friendship would begin to pull apart, as inexorably as a torn hem will undo a piece of fabric. The next time they met, if there was a next time, they would have nothing in common.

“Good luck, Mada,” Ure said. “I know you’ll be a better warrior for the clan than I ever was.”



“MADA, WHAT A surprise.” Ure could not entirely keep the sarcasm out of her voice as she opened the door. She’d Perceived the distinctive jade aura as soon as the woman stepped out of the car onto the sidewalk. Its texture was even heavier than she remembered it, grown thick from jade.

The Pillar's daughter came to a stop on Ure's front step. She was wearing a cream-colored skirt and a short-sleeved sweater that showed off the jade she wore on silver bracelets coiling up her forearms. Rumor was that Ayt Mada trained as relentlessly as any senior Fist and was equal to any of them with the blade. At the moment, however, she looked as if she'd come straight from a long day at the office, working as a Luckbringer in the Mountain clan. Only twenty-four years old and already she managed several of the clan's tributary businesses and answered directly to the Weather Man.

"May I come in?" she asked.

Ure stood aside and let the younger woman enter. She ought to feel embarrassed by how small and untidy the ground-floor apartment was, even if her stay here was temporary. Yet she couldn't rouse the energy to feel any more shame. She'd run out of that emotion and was beyond caring if Ayt Mada pitied her.

She closed the door and turned around to face her guest. "Why are you here, Mada?"

To Ure's surprise, the young woman seemed a bit taken aback by the suddenness of the question. The expression of hurt was fleeting—there and gone in an instant. "I came to see how you were doing," Mada said. "Whether you needed any help."

Ure chuckled darkly and went into the tiny kitchen, escaping the steady gaze of her uninvited guest by occupying her hands with putting away dishes and moving around items. "I'm fine," she assured Mada over her shoulder. "I'm going to move in with my brother, Noke. He was just promoted to Fist, and when Anden's older, I can find a job. We'll be okay for money." She shrugged and busied herself watering a potted plant that was too sickly to save. "Really, Mada, it's not a tragedy. Sometimes marriages don't work out."

Mada was kind enough not to point out that most marriages did not end quite so dramatically. She looked around, as if searching for a place to sit, but instead remained standing. "I'm sorry, Ure."

Ure felt her defenses sagging beneath resignation. She wiped her hands on a kitchen towel and turned reluctantly to face the other woman at last. "You were right, you know. You didn't say it out loud, but I knew what you were thinking at the time." She grimaced. "I was a fool for imagining I could have a future with Angus, that we could move to Espenia and start a

new life together. I was an optimistic lovestruck idiot. Of course he was going to find out eventually.”

Mada did not reply right away. “How did it happen?”

Ure walked out of the kitchen and dropped into the battered secondhand sofa with a sigh. “I never let him touch my jade. It wouldn’t be good for him, being a foreigner. I told him it was a taboo in Kekonese culture to touch another person’s jade—that’s true enough, and he accepted it. He knew only what most foreigners know about jade—that it’s valuable, but poisonous to non-Kekonese, and that with the right training, it can give a person greater abilities.”

“He never knew what you could do,” Mada inferred.

“He didn’t know I’d earned my jade in the war when I was young. He thought it came from my family, that I wore it for pride and vanity.” So stupid of her, to imagine the well-intentioned deception could last. She’d been in love with the idea of Angus and the life he offered more than the man himself. “After Anden was born, Angus left the military, but when money grew tight, he pressured me to sell my jade. He said it was worth a fortune and could get us a big house back in the town he came from.”

The pulse of horrified surprise in her guest’s aura was easy to Perceive. Green Bones did not *sell* their jade any more than a person would sell their grandmother’s ashes for fertilizer. Only a truly low and desperate person would contemplate it. Ure went on, unable to stop now that she was spilling out the whole truth. “We had so many arguments about it. He said I tied him down, that I wasn’t what he’d expected, that he should’ve married an Espenian woman.” Even the memory of the words was painful. With plaintive protest, “I tried to accommodate him, Mada, I did. But I didn’t have those womanly skills he wanted—cooking, cleaning, sewing, homemaking. I’m an *Aun*. I was raised to whisper names. I’m the *Witch*.”

Admitting this out loud felt like the final defeat; Ure sagged, picking angrily at the loose threads on the arm of the sofa. “One evening, we argued again about selling my jade, our worst fight yet. He hit me and grabbed me, with Anden right in front of us, watching. He tried to pull the jade off my neck.” Ure stopped and turned her face aside. “I’m sure you’ve heard the rest.”

She’d reacted with too much of her Strength and put her husband through a wall, breaking his arm and collarbone. After he got out of the

hospital in a cast, he'd left the country without speaking to her.

Mada's reply was not unkind, but Ure could still plainly hear the scorn. "He was trying to steal your jade. No one blames you for what you did. Only for your bad judgment in ending up in that situation."

Ure snorted. "You're not any good at making people feel better."

"That's not what I came here to do." Mada took several steps forward to stand in front of Ure, looking down at her with lips firmed. "You don't need shallow sympathy, Ure. You need your life back. Do you remember the dinner we had together in the Royal Lotus Teahouse, years ago? The offer I gave you then still stands. I've already spoken to my father about it, and he's agreed to accept you back into the Mountain clan." Mada's dense jade aura expanded, seemed to fill the tiny apartment. "You're better off without that foreigner. Come back and swear Green Bone oaths again. Use your jade proudly instead of hiding your abilities to fit into a man's illusion. Be the Witch again, the warrior who strikes fear into the hearts of the clan's enemies."

It was a tempting offer. Generous beyond what she deserved after her embarrassing fall from grace, a guaranteed path back into respectability and independence. The thought that Ayt Yugontin still remembered her and appreciated her for her gifts... It should not still have an effect on her, but it did. Her life had once been dangerous and violent, and yet, appealingly simple. A wave of yearning washed over her, silenced her with indecision. Mada waited, and it seemed neither of them was breathing.

Ure shook her head sadly, breaking free of the moment of weakness with a sigh. "I can't accept," she said. "My brother is a Fist in the No Peak clan. It would put us at odds for me to be a Green Bone of the Mountain. The Kaul family's clan is growing fast; it won't be long before it rivals your father's. What will happen then? What if Noke and I start having to hide things from each other, or even to work against each other? A family can't survive when divided by secrets. I learned that the hard way."

"You're the older sister and the better Green Bone," Mada pointed out. "Convince your brother to come with you over to the Mountain. We'll accept his allegiance as well. He can even keep the same rank."

"Noke went to Kaul Du Academy," Ure said. "He's close friends with Kaul Seningtun's grandson and is loyal to No Peak. I've helped him through some hard times, and he's helped me through mine. He's the only one in my

family who's never turned away from me, no matter what the rest of them said, and now he's letting me and Anden move in with him. I could never ask or force him to give up his own future for my sake."

"You'll be more of an asset to the Mountain than your brother will ever be to No Peak." Mada's voice rose in vexation. "The most capable person ought to make the decision."

Ayt Mada's high opinion of her ought to be flattering, but Ure was irritated. What made this twenty-four-year-old think she could ignore the messy reality of people's relationships and bully her way into the optimal outcome that suited her? Was that how she'd risen so quickly in the clan? Had she always been like this, and Ure had simply not noticed it when they were young? Or had Mada become that way in recent years, in order to stand out from her adoptive brothers and earn the name of Ayt?

"Is your father worried I might side with the Kauls?" Ure asked coolly. "Is that why you're really here?"

Mada took a half step back and crossed her jade-adorned arms, but she did not deny the accusation. "You can't blame him for considering the possibility," she answered tightly. "Things are...more complicated with Kaul Sen's clan these days."

Anden wandered in from the single bedroom where he'd been napping, dragging a worn stuffed lion behind him and rubbing his eyes. When he saw the stranger in the apartment, the three-year-old hurried to Ure on the sofa and leaned against her leg, staring up at their visitor with wide eyes. Mada gazed down at the toddler, not with the warm automatic smile that most adults offered to children, but with a tight-eyed look, as if he were a puzzling intrusion, the one to blame for his mother's intransigence.

Ure pulled her son close with instinctive defensiveness. She knew Mada was noticing his foreign appearance, thinking that the boy was now fatherless, wondering how he would ever fit in or amount to anything. "Anden, my little," Ure said, "where are your manners?" She could hear the forced cheerfulness in her own voice. Anden was ordinarily a quiet boy, but she wanted to show off that he could speak Kekonese fluently. "This is Ayt Madashi, your ma's friend from school a long time ago."

"Hello," Anden said shyly, not quite looking at the woman.

"*Hello, Ayt-jen,*" Ure corrected him firmly. "When you see an adult wearing jade, you should always salute them and address them respectfully."

Let Mada see that Ure was raising her son with proper Green Bone values, that he would be Kekonese in every way except his mixed blood.

“Hello, Ayt-jen,” Anden repeated, raising his eyes and touching his forehead this time.

“Go wash your hands and you can have a snack,” Ure told him. Anden seemed reluctant to leave, but he did as she said.

“He seems like an intelligent child,” Mada said. Perhaps she meant it as a compliment, but it sounded as if she were remarking on a shiny car or a pretty tree.

Ure stood up and faced her old friend squarely. “Tell your father he has nothing to worry about from me,” she said. “My brother will remain a Fist of No Peak, but I won’t go over to the Kauls. I won’t return to the Mountain either. I just want to be left alone to raise my son. I won’t be a bother to either clan.”

Mada said fiercely, “Listen to yourself, Ure. You’re only twenty-seven years old and already resigned to living the rest of your life as a *nobody*. What happened to you? How could you let a man and a child drag you down like this? I’m giving you a way out, a way to return. The offer won’t come again.”

Ure nodded with calm understanding. “I’m old news, Mada,” she said. “I’m a story that grandparents tell children when they talk about the war, but no one thinks of me as the Witch anymore. Except you. You must’ve risked your standing with your father to advocate for bringing a disgrace like me back into the clan. That alone means a lot to me. It makes me think you really do care. But my answer is the same.”

The Pillar’s daughter was silent. When at last she spoke again, her voice was monotone but as thick as her turbulent aura. “You helped me a long time ago, when I first came to Wie Lon. You told me that as long as we had jade and could use it for ourselves, we could do *anything*. I believed you. I still do.”

Show me. Ure remembered the surprising forcefulness on that thin teenage girl’s face. *Show me what’s possible.* The same expression was on the woman’s face now, demanding a satisfactory answer. *If Mada was a man, Ure thought, she would be a Fist, she would be Ayt Yugontin’s heir.*

Ure raised her hand to her throat, to the encircling gemstones her husband had tried to take from her. “Maybe there’s still some truth to that,”

she said quietly. “Your jade made you the daughter of the Spear of Kekon and Weather Man-in-training of the Mountain clan.” Ure gathered her jade energy with the effortlessness of drawing a breath, not as a threat, only enough to demonstrate the unchanged power of her aura, the ease with which she could unleash it. She was friendless, disowned, a poor single mother—but she was not a victim; she would never be that. “And *my* jade, Ayt-jen, is the reason I can say no to you.”

Ayt Mada’s expression flinched with the sharp anger of betrayal, only for a second. Then it closed as hard as a steel gate. She turned firmly and went to the door of the apartment. “You’re making a mistake, Ure,” she said, without turning around. “One you’ll regret even more than your other foolish choices.”

“My mistakes gave me Anden,” Ure said. “I don’t regret them.”

Aun Ure watched her old classmate leave for what she knew would be the last time, then closed the door and leaned against it. “I regret losing your friendship, Mada. But you hardly need it anymore.”



Readers can't seem to get enough of Ayt Madashi, and I don't blame them. I deliberately refrained from writing Ayt Mada as a point of view character anywhere in the Green Bone Saga, not because she wasn't worthy, but because it would be just like her to take over the narrative. Ayt Madashi is an all-or-nothing person. It would be weak of me as an author, disrespectful to the Pillar, to give her the reins to the story for a mere chapter here or there, when one could easily imagine the entire saga from her perspective. The Green Bone Saga is not Ayt Madashi's story, but I'm proud of how she looms large throughout it, her motivations and actions clear and inescapable, malicious yet complex.

“The Witch and Her Friend” came about because a reader asked me whether Ayt Madashi and Anden’s mother, Aun Uremayada, would’ve known each other. I realized that the answer was yes, of course they would have. They were of a similar age, they attended Wie Lon Temple School at the same time, and they were the two most powerful and famous Green Bone women of their generation. It was inconceivable that they wouldn’t have interacted. Their relationship began to emerge in my mind. Mada and Ure came from starkly dissimilar backgrounds and survived the Many Nations War under completely different circumstances. They were peers for a

brief but formative time, then went on to walk divergent paths. This story, a series of snapshots between them, was a chance for me to shed light on Anden's mother, a Green Bone so powerful she's invoked with awe but is remembered primarily for her tragic death, to portray the struggles of these accomplished women a generation before Kaul Shae became Weather Man of No Peak, and to give us a new view of Ayt Madashi, from someone who knew her not as the Pillar, but as a friend.

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NOT ONLY BLOOD

AUN NOKEMURA took off his jade and jumped to his death off the Way Away Bridge late on a Fifthday summer evening in full view of passing traffic.

Kaul Lanshinwan heard the tragic news from his grandfather the following morning. “Only twenty-four years old, and the last male of the Aun line,” Kaul Sen sighed sadly, sitting down to breakfast and motioning impatiently for Lan’s mother to hurry bringing his tea. “The Auns were heroes of the war. How could such a powerful Green Bone family be so unlucky?” Kaul Sen curled his lip and made a smacking sound of bewildered disappointment.

Lan stood in the kitchen, numb with disbelief and shock. Aun Noke had been his good friend and classmate; they had been among the fifty children in the very first class of students at Kaul Dushuron Academy. After their graduation five years ago, Noke had sworn oaths to No Peak and become a strong and talented young Fist who carried his jade well and always seemed cheerful, funny, and well-liked. A contrast to some of his more volatile relatives. At times, he would unexpectedly fall into sudden and severe bouts of depression, but they had seemed brief enough, or else Noke had masked them well enough, that Lan hadn’t imagined his friend would ever end his own life.

Now, along with astonishment and grief, Lan felt a terrible sense of guilt. Over the past year, at his grandfather’s direction, he’d pulled back from duties on the military side of the clan to focus on his college classes and on shadowing No Peak leaders, learning all the functions of the clan, understanding its large and complex web of relationships. He’d had little time to spare to keep in touch with old school friends like Aun and Woon. If only he’d spoken to Aun Noke at the right moment, could he have turned him away from such an irreversible decision?

“I need to go see Aun’s sister,” Lan said.

His grandfather sipped his tea and unfolded a newspaper. “We don’t have time for it today. We have to attend Ayt Imminsho’s funeral at noon.” Ayt Im—yet another young Green Bone warrior in his early twenties, killed last week in a clean-bladed duel.

“I barely knew Ayt Im,” Lan protested. “Why should I go to a stranger’s funeral instead of visiting the grieving family of one of my best friends who just died?”

Kaul Sen frowned at Lan’s tone. The patriarch was not a patient man, nor one accustomed to being defied. Although he was coming up on seventy, he showed no sign of slowing down. His hair was gray but thick, his eyes and voice strong and sharp, his jade abilities equal to those of men decades younger. Fifteen years after the war, the newspapers still referred to him as the Torch of Kekon. Grandda’s status as a national figure was long cemented, his rule over the clan and the family absolute.

Yet perhaps preeminent among the many traits he was famous for, Kaul Sen valued the bonds of friendship above all else. He spoke often of the comrades—some alive, many others dead—whom he’d fought alongside against the Shotarians during the Many Nations War. In the peacetime that followed, those who had stuck by him over the years had been richly rewarded with generous patronage and high positions in the clan. The brotherhood of Green Bone warriors, he said, was even stronger than blood.

Lan’s appeal on the basis of personal friendship made the old man pause. He conceded, “It was hardly an honorable or worthwhile death for a Green Bone, but still, I’ll send the Horn with condolences and money for Aun’s relatives—not that there are many left at this point.” Short life spans seemed to run in that family. Two of Noke’s uncles had been killed in the Many Nations War. His father had hanged himself five years ago. One of his aunts had drunk herself to death.

Lan wasn’t satisfied. “You and Ayt Yugontin have barely spoken in years. You have your own clans now. Grandda, surely it’s more important for me to go in person to pay respect to one of No Peak’s own Fists.”

“You have to go to Ayt’s son’s funeral,” his grandfather ordered, slapping the newspaper against the kitchen table. “It doesn’t matter how things stand between me and Ayt. It’s a matter of respect in the Green Bone community. If my own grandson and heir didn’t show up, it would be an insult.”

Lan personally thought it unlikely anyone in the Mountain clan would notice or care about his absence, but Grandda placed a great deal of stock on propriety and appearances. Lan pointed toward the clock on the wall. "If I leave right now, I can still visit the Auns, even if it's only for a few minutes. Then I'll go straight to Widow's Park in time for Ayt Im's funeral."

Lan's grandmother came into the kitchen, humming a tune, and placed a kiss on the top of her husband's head before sitting down next to him as Lan's mother brought out a breakfast of steamed eggs, custard pastries, and sliced fruit. Grandma acted as if she hadn't heard any of the conversation but instructed mildly, "Sit down and eat a little before you go, Lan-se. It's not good to rush out on an empty stomach."

Lan sat down at the table dutifully and picked up a custard pastry even though the tragic news had destroyed his appetite. At least he could Perceive his grandfather's jade aura had changed subtly—quieted and smoothed—presaging a change of heart as well. When Kaul Sen was stuck in a principled position, Lan's grandmother, despite the fact that she took no part in clan business and was frequently waylaid with health issues, was one of the few people who could blunt his sharper and more tyrannical impulses.

"I suppose it would be a good idea for you to see how Aun Ure is holding up," Kaul Sen said offhandedly at last, reaching for the plate of fruit and not looking at Lan, making it clear from his tone that it had been his decision, not influenced by anyone else. "If I were to guess which Aun was going to lose their mind and leap off a bridge, I would've guessed it would be that witch woman, not her brother. A godsdamned shame. That family's as green as they come in body, but they're all feeble in the mind." Kaul Sen shook his head regretfully and returned his attention to his breakfast.



WHEN LAN ARRIVED at Aun Noke's house in a black suit and tie, he found a small gathering of Noke's relatives and friends, including several classmates from their Academy days together. Lan embraced Woon Papidonwa near the front door and they promised sadly to keep in better touch from now on.

"Lan-jen," people murmured, saluting him as he entered the house, which made him feel a touch uncomfortable. Over the past two years, even

people he knew well had begun to treat him more formally, all of them aware that he was being groomed to become the next Pillar of the clan. But Lan was only twenty-three years old, and nearly every interaction he had with his grandfather, including the one this morning, suggested the Torch would not be retiring anytime soon, so the formality was premature.

Lan found Noke's older sister, Aun Uremayada, standing in a small knot of people who were offering their condolences. Aun Ure was twenty-nine years old and one of the most heavily jeweled women Lan had ever met. Gemstones encircled her neck in a three-layer choker. The texture of her powerful jade aura had always struck him as distinctive but a bit unpleasant to Perceive—bright, coarse, and unsettled. Today, it was subdued by grief, as dimly muffling and expressionless as the blank look on her face.

Lan went up to the woman and saluted her shallowly but with respect. "Ure-jen," he said gently, "I came as soon as I heard. My grandfather wasn't able to come right away, but he sent me to convey the grief and condolences of the Kaul family." Lan's voice fell. "Noke was my friend, and I wish I could've done something to help him. He deserved a much longer and happier life, let the gods recognize him."

Ure looked up, but her gaze seemed to slide right off him like water. "Thank you, Lan-jen."

"If there's anything the clan can do to help, you need only ask."

She nodded absently and turned away from him as if searching for something misplaced. Ure was an anomaly in Janloon: a Green Bone without clan status. As a child with prodigious jade ability, she'd begun training in Wie Lon Temple School during the war, back when it was still a secret camp hidden in the mountains. At the age of thirteen she'd begun carrying out missions for the One Mountain Society, soon developing a reputation as fearsome as any of her brothers, earning the moniker "the Witch" from fearful Shotarian officials and admiring Kekonese alike.

Seeing the woman's shoulders drooping under a shapeless white blouse and her face rendered colorless under a layer of white mourning powder, it was hard for Lan to picture Ure as the terrifying child assassin she had once been. She'd remained loyal to Ayt Yu and the Mountain clan, but not long after the end of the war, she'd fallen in love with an Espenian serviceman and had a child by him. To no one's surprise but her own, the faithless

foreigner had abandoned her three years ago, so she'd been left alone, except for her brother Noke, and now Noke was also gone.

Lan glanced around the dreary gathering and saw Ure's six-year-old son sitting by himself in the corner, quietly putting together a jigsaw puzzle. No one was paying attention to the child. In appearance, the boy unfortunately took after his absent father—fair skin, light brown hair, foreign eyes.

Noke had cared about his fatherless little nephew, had probably paid more attention to him than the boy's own mother. Aun Ure could be sweet and protective toward her son, but like all the Aun family, it seemed, she was inconstant and unpredictable, sometimes full of energy and at other times falling into periods of lethargy when she would barely leave the house or even her room for days. Lan hadn't ever seen Ure actively mistreat the child, but he recalled a few times in the past when he'd seen the boy looking as if he hadn't bathed or changed his clothes for days, wandering about with a neglected air, poking about the cupboards for food.

Lan went over and sat down on the floor next to him. "Anden," he said. "Do you remember me? We've met before. My name's Kaul Lan. I'm your uncle's friend."

Anden looked up from his puzzle, which appeared to be missing some pieces, and glanced into Lan's face with shy acknowledgment before averting his gaze. "Uncle Noke's dead, isn't he?" the boy said quietly.

Lan hesitated, then nodded sadly. "Let the gods recognize him."

"He took off his jade. Sometimes, when no one else was around, I'd see him take it off and look at it, then put it back on. Yesterday, he took it off and didn't put it back on." Anden's bottom lip trembled and he bit it, whitening the soft skin. "People take off their jade when they don't need it. When they don't want to live anymore."

It pained Lan afresh to think that Noke, a young and powerful Fist with his whole life ahead of him, had secretly been suffering such despair and panic that he'd been rehearsing the moment when he would take off his jade for good. All the while, his six-year-old nephew had been the only one to see.

Lan said, "I know your uncle loved you very much."

"Then why would he leave?" Anden's quick reply was confused, angry.

Lan had no answer. He was not a member of the Aun family so Noke's spirit was not going to appear to him during the two-day silent vigil before

the funeral, but Lan wished as badly as Anden that he could demand answers from his friend. How could he abandon his sister and her son? Ure did not strike him as a reliable mother; who would look after the child and make sure he was cared for?

Lan was accustomed to dealing with children; his own brother and sister were eight and nine years younger than he was. “Sometimes, people are in so much pain that they don’t think clearly,” he offered. “They make awful choices that hurt themselves and others without intending to. It doesn’t mean your uncle didn’t care about you.”

“My ma won’t ever take off her jade, will she?” Worry cracked the boy’s small voice. “She promised me that she wouldn’t, no matter what.”

Lan had assured his grandfather that his visit to the Aun home would be brief and that he would not be late; he’d already stayed past when he needed to leave. Taking a pen from the breast pocket of his suit, he tore a corner of blank paper from a coloring book lying on the ground. He wrote down his name and the main phone number of the Kaul house and put the scrap of paper in the boy’s hand, closing the child’s fist around the paper.

“Anden, do you know how to use the phone if you need to?” When the boy nodded up at him with wide, serious eyes, Lan said, “If you ever need help, if you’re ever worried about your ma or anything else, call me at this number, understand? Keep it safe.”



LAN ARRIVED AT the entrance of the Heaven Awaiting Cemetery right on time, just as the rest of his family was pulling up in two cars. The Pillar and the Horn, along with Lan’s mother and grandmother, were in one car. The Weather Man, Yun Doru, had been sent to pick up Lan’s siblings from the dormitory of Kaul Dushuron Academy. Hilo and Shae must’ve been bickering on the ride over because he could hear their voices and Perceive their sharp, vibrating teenage energies as they emerged from the vehicle.

“Gods in Heaven, what happened your face?” Lan exclaimed.

Hilo was properly dressed in a suit and tie, but his eyes were blackened, the bruises a few days old and turning green. His upper lip was puffy and he was sniffing loudly, apparently only able to breathe through one side of his

nose. "I got in a fight with the Maik brothers," he said. With admiration, "Godsdamn, those two bastards can deal it out."

Lan grimaced; the Maiks were not a respectable family. "Did you win at least?"

Hilo considered. "I'd say it was a tie."

Kaul Sen strode up and cuffed the fifteen-year-old across the back of the head. "This is the third phone call in as many months that I've received from the Grandmaster about you, boy," their grandfather growled in an undertone. "If our name wasn't on the school, you'd have been expelled by now and rightly so. Keep this nonsense up and I'll pull you out myself."

"Come on, Grandda, it was off campus," Hilo whinged, rubbing the back of his head ruefully. "And don't you think I've suffered enough? Look at my face." He didn't sound concerned. Kaul Sen's authority was ironclad in the clan, but in this particular regard, his threat was empty and Hilo knew it. There was no chance the patriarch would allow any member of the family to grow up without the best martial education available; his pride would not permit it. He'd even sent his youngest, female grandchild to the Academy; Shae was one of only twelve girls in her year.

Hilo, as unruly as he was at school, was too martially talented, too obviously destined to become a high-ranking Fist at the very least. No amount of suffered exasperation could blind the Pillar to the fact that his younger grandson, properly trained, would become a fearsome asset to the clan. This knowledge made Hilo almost blithely immune to their grandfather's disapproval. Lan found it hard to imagine any teenager being more secure in his place in the world. Even as the presumptive heir, Lan's path was not guaranteed. Leadership in the clan was commonly but not strictly hereditary. However, there was always a place in the clan for a man who could fight.

Shae, looking pretty but decidedly grumpy in a white summer dress and mourning face powder, side-eyed Hilo disdainfully. "You're an embarrassment. You look like a ghoul."

Hilo responded to his sister with an ugly sneer. "I could have weeping boils on my face and still have more friends than you. If it weren't for that doe-eyed girl Paya, you'd eat alone every day."

"That's enough," Lan ordered, before they could escalate further. They didn't always listen to him, but he was much older and wore jade, and more

than once when they were younger, he'd separated them physically and none too gently. "We're here for the funeral of Grandda's friend's son, so show some godsdamned respect."

Hilo and Shae fell resentfully silent. The two of them were only eleven months apart and always needling each other. The administration at the Academy had been impressed by Shae's childhood jade aptitude tests and with misguided good intentions had placed her in the class a year ahead, so that she would be in the same cohort as Hilo. Since female students were a growing but still small percentage of the student body, the Pillar's granddaughter would surely feel more at ease in a class with her older brother, who could protect and assist her, so they thought.

Instead, the siblings clashed incessantly. Shae was a diligent student, smarter and more capable than most of the boys; she wanted no help from Hilo and went out of her way to have nothing to do with him on campus. Hilo, brash and charismatic, a natural leader among his peers, was offended his own little sister paid him so little regard; he rarely passed up a retaliatory opportunity to tease or belittle her.

At times Lan wished he had a sibling closer to his own age, someone who he could talk to about the particular pressures that came with being a Kaul in a way that none of his friends could ever understand—but then he looked at Hilo and Shae and thought perhaps he was better off as he was.

Kaul Sen was already striding up the path toward the cemetery. "Come walk next to your grandda, Shae-se, and tell me how your classes are going," he called over his shoulder. "Did you enter the poetry competition this year?"

With a smug, cutting backward glance at Hilo, Shae hurried to walk next to their grandfather, looping her arm around the crook of his proffered elbow as the old man led the way. In this one area, Hilo could never win against her. Neither could Lan, for that matter. Kaul Sen did not hide his favoritism.

Hilo made a rude gesture behind Shae's back and fell into step beside Lan. He was only starting to catch up to Lan in height, but underneath the adolescent lankiness of fresh growth was an architecture that suggested it wouldn't be long after he got his jade that he would be a truly formidable sparring partner even to his older brother. As a child, he'd always pestered Lan, wanting to wrestle and roughhouse, no matter if he couldn't win.

When they were younger, Lan used to let his brother win sometimes, but he didn't do that anymore. Now he kept Hilo in his place.

"Why did we all have to get so dressed up and come to this, anyway?" Hilo groused. "It's not as if the Ayt's are our friends. We barely know them."

"It's a matter of respect," Lan said, reluctantly echoing his grandfather's words to him from earlier that morning. "And it's important to Grandda."

The funeral was very large and very long. Ayt Im had been killed in a clean-bladed duel, over some slight that Lan knew nothing about. As penitents in white funerary robes chanted the recitations that would usher the unfortunate young man's spirit into the afterlife, Lan studied the members of the Ayt family, whom he hadn't had much occasion to encounter before. Ayt Yugontin, Grandda's old war comrade, was younger than Kaul Sen, and a more expansive man in stature and manner. He had a broad chest and shoulders and the confident physical solidity of a deeply rooted tree that had withstood many typhoons. If he'd grown a bit heavier in recent years and less physically nimble than he'd been during his famous times as a warrior, the strong thrum of his jade aura left no doubt that he was still healthy and formidable. His solemn expression as he watched the casket being lowered seemed to Lan to be less grief-stricken than resigned. Disappointed.

After the final Deitist recitations and the crashing of drums and cymbals had ushered the young man's spirit into the afterlife, Lan heard his grandfather mutter under his breath to Doru, "I'll never understand what was in his mind when he did it. He was still in his forties when the war ended. Young enough to marry again and have children of his own blood. Why would he adopt *orphans*, children who were already nine, ten, and *thirteen*? What kind of a man would do that?"

A good man, Lan thought, but he knew that was not what his grandfather was thinking. Kaul Sen's question was spoken in derisive bewilderment.

Yun Doru pinched his thin lips together before answering in his thoughtful, raspy voice. "Ah, it's only proof that even the people we think we know are mysteries to us." The Weather Man tapped his narrow chin with the tip of a long forefinger. "Ayt-jen had the orphans tested for jade aptitude before he adopted them and sent them to be schooled at Wie Lon. His own son would've been ten years old at the time, ready to begin training

that very year, if he hadn't been killed in the crib by the Shotarian bombings. Perhaps Ayt-jen simply didn't have the heart to start over making a new family and wished for children he could begin to evaluate right away as possible heirs."

Kaul Sen snorted, beady eyes narrowed as he scrutinized Ayt from a distance. "He's far too young to be thinking like that. Look at him, not even sixty yet. I'll be seventy next year." *And I'll be Pillar for a long time yet.* He didn't say the words, but given the touch of smugness in his voice, he might as well have. "Besides, if he was searching for potential heirs, then why adopt the girl?"

"She's hardly a girl anymore," Doru pointed out. Ayt Mada was twenty-six, a Luckbringer in the Mountain clan, heavily jaded for a young woman, and by all accounts extremely capable both with the moon blade and in the boardroom.

"Ayt's playing a game of dice with his own family name. You can't know how a child of unknown blood will turn out. Now the older boy's gotten himself killed. Honorably enough at least, but nevertheless, by foolishly offering a clean blade above his own level." Sen sighed.

Lan had been silently listening, but now he couldn't hold his thoughts in any longer and felt he had to speak up. "Grandda," he said in a low voice, as the funeral crowd broke up into small groups of muted conversation, "you've often described Ayt Yugontin as a courageous warrior and great man who was willing to give his life for his country, just like you. Is it so hard to believe that maybe he wasn't just selfishly looking for an heir but might've wanted to help children who'd lost everything in the war, just like he did? You always say the clan is a brotherhood, and its ties are stronger than any other, so a family doesn't all have to share the same blood."

Lan's grandfather gave him an arched-eyebrows glance that he interpreted as partly impressed and slightly condescending. An expression that said, *You're clever, boy. Clever, but still young.*

The look irritated Lan. "Maybe Ayt-jen *is* rolling dice, but who's to say that won't turn out to his advantage?" he went on. "People praised Ayt-jen's decision to adopt the orphans. They admire his big heart, the way he thinks of all Kekonese before himself, and how he chose to give homes to orphans who'd lost their own rather than taking another wife and fathering more

children at a time when the country was recovering from war and there was already barely enough to go around.”

Kaul Sen said, a touch curtly, “Come. We’ll pay our respects to Ayt and leave. There’s no need to stay longer than necessary.” Perhaps Lan’s words had reminded him that while he and Ayt had once been brothers-in-arms, they were very different people. In the absence of a common enemy, their differences had caused them to divide the One Mountain Society into two separate clans that increasingly stuck to their own schools, businesses, and territories.

Lan’s grandfather led the family up to the front of the line of mourners. Ayt Yu saw, or more likely Perceived, his approach and turned toward the Kaul family, polite acknowledgment settling over his face like a mask. “Kaul Sen,” he said, tilting his chin. “It’s been a while.”

“And a sad occasion for a reunion,” Kaul Sen said. The two old warriors—the Spear and the Torch of Kekon—regarded each other with wary hesitancy for a long moment. Lan could sense the eyes of the hundreds of funeral goers not-so-surreptitiously observing the encounter.

Sen’s frigid expression thawed. The lines of hard wrinkles around his eyes and mouth softened, and he said, with genuine quiet emotion, “You were there for me when Du was buried. You spoke at his funeral when I had no words. Of course, I had to come today. I know what it’s like to lose a son.”

Ayt’s heavy-lidded eyes blinked; he seemed genuinely touched. “Thank you, old friend.”

At the Pillar’s prompting, each of the Kaul family members saluted their grandfather’s comrade with great respect, and Ayt called over his remaining son and his daughter, who both saluted Kaul Sen in turn.

Lan had met the adoptees a long time ago, when he was just a boy, in that period of time after the war before Grandda and Ayt Yu had drifted apart and the clans were still friendly with each other. He’d encountered Ayt Eodo and Ayt Mada on a few occasions since, though he did not know them well personally. Eodo was about Lan’s own age, taller and smooth-skinned, but he wore only three jade studs—two in his nose and one over his left eyebrow. Even at his own brother’s funeral, he was sporting a colorful striped tie, though his guileless expression and distractable energy were more muted than usual.

Mada was older, a pretty but unsmiling young woman, who held herself slightly apart and seemed more impatient than saddened by the whole affair. She wore more jade than Eodo, mounted in a pair of silver bracelets on her forearms, and after exchanging minimal pleasantries, she moved aside to accept funerary money and condolences from the Mountain clan's approaching Lantern Men, her distinctive thick jade aura inscrutable as she wordlessly left her adoptive father to continue his conversation with the Kauls.

Hilo nudged Lan and leaned over to speak quietly, indicating Ayt Eodo with a jerk of the chin. "I could take him, easy," he said, not with any malice, simply cheerful braggadocio. Eodo was seven years older, much larger, and wore jade. "What do you think?"

Hilo possessed a typical adolescent fixation with social status, filtered through the eyes of a future Green Bone destined for the military side of the clan. Lan wondered how much mental energy Hilo expended sizing up every man he met, shifting them around in his mental hierarchy and coming to favorable conclusions about his own odds. "This is his brother's funeral, for gods' sake," Lan scolded in a hiss.

Hilo shrugged. "What do you think?"

Lan did not answer him. Even though the meeting between the families was solemn and cordial, Lan thought he could perceive a faintly taut undercurrent in the jade energy that emanated from the two patriarchs. A uniquely petty quality exists in any rivalry grown out of a degraded past friendship, and even though the Kaul family was here ostensibly out of respect and sympathy, there was something else subtle and unsaid in the encounter—in the way Sen had insisted that Lan, Hilo, and Shae all be present today.

*Your clan may be larger. You may be younger and stronger, more praised and admired,*Kaul Sen seemed to be saying to Ayt without words. *But see how I have three living grandchildren—Green Bones of my own blood.*

"It was good to see you again, Kaul-jen," Ayt said gruffly, as the Pillars wrapped up their vaguely uncomfortable conversation and took leave of each other. "I've lost two sons now, so it seems that even after so much war, the greedy gods aren't satisfied with what they've taken. I hope they treat you better than they have me, by continuing to grant you good health and shining favor on your family."

“Let them recognize your son,” Sen replied gravely, “and bring you no more heartache.”



LAN STOOD RESOLUTE in his grandfather's study fourteen months later. “We should adopt Anden.”

The hospital had phoned less than an hour ago to give them the news that Lan had been anticipating with dread for days. Aun Ure was dead of the Itches, her mind gone before her body had finally succumbed. Noke's older sister and last immediate relative, at one time a powerful Green Bone warrior, a mother, worn down by misfortunes in life but still healthy and sane the last time he'd seen her less than six months ago. Everything she had once been had been horribly supplanted in Lan's memory by a shrieking, thrashing, wild-eyed madwoman, smearing blood and spraying spittle and invectives.

The Itches had come on suddenly, as they sometimes did, although she must've sensed symptoms earlier and hidden them. Ure had told her son the truth; she had not taken off her jade, not even when it had been killing her. Thank Heaven she hadn't killed anyone else when her green had been removed by force.

Lan had brought Aun's terrified son from the hospital back to the Kaul house. The child had finally fallen asleep in Hilo's old room. “Aun Ure's boy should go to his relatives,” Lan's grandfather said, without looking up from the papers he was perusing from the comfort of his favorite leather armchair.

“He has no relatives,” Lan replied. Ure had been the last of her direct family line. “The only distantly related ones I could find won't take him.” For days, Lan had made unfruitful phone calls. No one wanted a seven-year-old mixed-blood foreign-looking boy from the obviously cursed Aun bloodline.

Kaul Sen set down the business reports he was studying. He lit a cigarette and dropped the pack on top of the papers on the coffee table. “We'll have to track down the father, then. Make that irresponsible foreigner take his son back to Espenia.”

Lan took a cigarette from his grandfather's pack and lit it for himself. Ayt Im, Aun Noke, and now Anden's mother. The Many Nations War was long over; the country was at peace. The clans existed safely and openly in society and the Kekonese economy was booming. So why did young Green Bones still die at such a high rate? How could it be normal in this day and age for him to know three people near his own age, all of them already dead?

More than a year ago, he'd felt helpless at being unable to predict or prevent Noke's suicide. And here he was, culpable again. He hadn't been friends with Ure the way he'd been friends with her brother, but he'd checked up on her and Anden every few months to ensure they had what they needed. Ure was a proud woman despite her isolation and loneliness. She insisted she and her son were fine and didn't need the help of the No Peak clan. She'd carried a heavy load of jade ever since she was a teenage girl; there was no reason to imagine she would succumb to the Itches. But stress and poor physical health could lower a person's jade tolerance. If things had gone better for Aun Ure throughout her life, most likely this tragedy would never have happened. *Was it true?* Lan wondered despondently. Was the Aun bloodline simply cursed, every one of its members destined for misfortune and early death?

Lan set his teeth. Curse or no, he had one chance left to do right by Noke. He was not going to let Anden fall into the same cycle as his relatives. If there was some deficiency with the Aun line, perhaps the boy's foreign side would cancel it out. More importantly, though, he needed a better home, a better upbringing and environment, better role models than he'd had so far in his life.

Lan took a drag on the cigarette and sat down silently in the seat across from his grandfather. He might only be twenty-four, still young and inexperienced, but over the past few years of learning how to deal with clan stakeholders, he'd gotten better at emanating a sense of calm and serious imperturbability on the outside, keeping even his jade aura steady when his thoughts were racing. He was not going to succeed in getting his way by acting like a child pleading with a parent as if to keep a puppy. He was an adult, a heavily jadeed Green Bone of No Peak; right now, he had to speak as a clan heir to his Pillar.

“As unlucky as they are, the Auns were a family of powerful Green Bone warriors,” Lan reminded his grandfather reasonably. “Several of them gave their lives fighting in the war and were loyal to No Peak. You can’t send their only descendant away to a foreign country to be raised by a man he barely knows. It would reflect poorly on the clan, make us seem heartless.”

The Pillar sniffed skeptically; would anyone really consider the orphan boy a proper Aun, or even Kekonese enough to merit the clan’s attention? But Lan could tell he’d given his grandfather pause. “Your friend was a Fist, but his sister never swore oaths to No Peak,” Kaul Sen pointed out. “That mad witch used to be in the Mountain. If any clan should be responsible for her offspring, it’s Ayt Yu’s.”

“Why should we let the Mountain clan have him?” Lan countered, angling to appeal to his grandfather’s sense of vanity and self-interest. “No Peak needs warriors, especially if we’re to grow as large as Ayt’s clan. Anden could become a Green Bone just as powerful as his mother and uncles.”

Kaul Sen leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms and eyeing his grandson with inscrutable consideration. “Maybe,” the Pillar replied. “Or maybe not. You don’t know what you’ll get out of a mixed-blood child. That boy is like a cross between a goat and a tiger. Who knows what he’ll become?”

Lan couldn’t tell if his grandfather was trying to goad him into frustration, to see how he would react, whether he would lose his composure when faced with indifferent callousness over something he cared about. Was this a test? The Pillar taking the opportunity to measure Lan’s fitness as a successor based on what he said next? Sometimes Lan felt as if he existed in a constant state of proving himself, of having to think and speak and act in ways that were not simply true to himself, but better. *Greener*. At this moment, he couldn’t even tell if arguing for Anden’s welfare with Grandda was what the old man wanted him to do or not. Did it matter? Either way, it was too important for him to back down or fail.

“It’s true that the future is unknown,” Lan said to his grandfather, “but right now, Anden is only a boy who needs a home and a family. In three years, he’ll be old enough to send to the Academy, and at that time you can judge for yourself what his worth might be to the clan. By the time he grows up, assuming I’m the Pillar you’re training me to be, he’ll be my problem, not yours.”

Lan held his grandfather's gaze as he finished his cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray. "A long time ago, you told me that during the war, you and Ayt Yu swore a pledge that if either of you died fighting the Shotarians, the other would raise his comrade's son. Noke and I grew up in different times and didn't make a pledge like that, but we would have. I know he loved his nephew and wanted him to be cared for. Grandda, we're fortunate to have enough money and jade, and room in our house and in the family. The rest of the country doesn't see as clearly as I do that deep down, you're every bit as compassionate and generous a man as Ayt Yu ever was."

The Pillar was silent for a long time. At last he said, "Bring the boy down here."

Lan went up to Hilo's room and entered quietly. Anden was lying on the floor, curled up under a blanket, exhausted from the trauma of the past few days. He'd been the one to discover his mother mutilating herself. Lan was astonished that under such horrifying circumstances, the boy had managed to think clearly enough to run out and call the number Lan had written down for him last year. Since then, however, he'd been nearly mute, and by the time he'd been given the news that his mother was dead, he was beyond tears, having spent them all already. Why he'd chosen to sleep on the floor instead of the bed, Lan couldn't say. Perhaps he thought he was not allowed to use the furniture.

Lan knelt down and put a hand on the lump of blankets. Anden was not really sleeping, merely in a sort of stupor. "Anden, I need you to come with me." The boy sat up slowly, rubbing his eyes, and obediently put his hand into Lan's. Lan took him downstairs and into the study.

Kaul Sen sat forward in his seat and motioned the boy closer. Lan walked with Anden up to the Pillar. He could feel the child's grip tightening on his fingers and Perceive his small heart beating fast.

"You must be Anden." Kaul Sen could be sharp and critical, but when he chose, he could also be perfectly cordial, reasonable, able to put anyone at ease. His steady gaze was scrutinizing but not unkind.

Anden relaxed a tiny bit as he looked into the old man's face and nodded. "Yes, Kaul-jen," he said quietly but clearly.

Sen nodded approvingly at the boy's manners. "What a terrible week you've been through," he said. "You've been very brave, though, a true warrior just like your mother and uncles." He leaned closer. "My grandson

wants you to come and live with us now, as a member of our family. Is that something you would want?"

Anden glanced up uncertainly at Lan, who smiled at him encouragingly. Anden's small body began to tremble as he looked back and forth between the young man who'd taken him from the hospital and the elderly patriarch of the clan. The boy seemed to be waging a war within himself, all the intensely jumbled emotions of fear, grief, confusion, and excitement too great for any seven-year-old to be expected to withstand. "Has...has anyone in your family ever taken off their jade?" he asked uncertainly.

"Never," Kaul Sen replied.

Anden squeezed Lan's hand tightly, his palm damp. "Has anyone ever gotten the Itches?"

"No one." Kaul Sen raised a stern finger into the air and said solemnly, "The Kaul family is at the head of the No Peak clan for a reason. Jade is heavy—too heavy for many people—but we carry it proudly and lightly. We're fortunate the gods favor us, and we do what we can to share that favor with others." Kaul Sen placed a hand on the boy's thin shoulder and said, "The clan is a brotherhood of warriors, and so long as you give your loyalty, you will never be alone."

Anden looked down at the floor. "I want to stay here," he whispered.

"It's settled then. This is your home now. You'll be like a cousin to my own grandchildren. One day, you'll be a Green Bone warrior just like them." Kaul Sen got to his feet as briskly as a man decades younger, smiling with magnanimous triumph, as if he were the one who'd wanted to adopt Aun Ure's son all along.

"Get the poor boy some food," he said to Lan, "and then have that new Abukei housekeeper set up a room for him and send your mother to get him some new clothes, ones that fit properly." To Anden he said, warmly but with parental authority, "You're a Kaul now, you need to look the part."

Lan took Anden out of the study and into the kitchen. The boy looked around the house with more interest than he had the previous day, still visibly nervous, though when Kyanla brought him a bowl of beef soup and a plate of nuts and pickles, he ate with concentration and gradually seemed to grow calmer.

Lan sat next to him at the kitchen table. “Don’t be scared of Grandda. He seems strict, but deep down, he has a soft heart. You have two other cousins now, besides me. Hilo and Shae—they’re at the Academy right now, but you’ll meet them soon. They’ll like you.”

Anden nodded trustingly. He reached into his pocket and took out a crumpled scrap of paper—the corner of the coloring book page Lan had written on, thin and grayed, the phone number barely legible. He rubbed the worn paper between his fingers, then surrendered it into Lan’s hand. “I guess this is my phone number now, too,” he said wonderingly. “Good thing I already know it.”



It’s safe to say that Kaul Lan made one of the best decisions in the history of the No Peak clan when he brought a seven-year-old orphan named Emery Anden into the Kaul family. Tragically, Lan and Anden’s relationship gets only a little page time in the Green Bone Saga, yet Lan’s influence over the story never fades, in no small part because of Anden, who carries his uncle-brother in his heart as a role model throughout his life.

“Not Only Blood” is the most family-focused story in the collection; not only do we get Lan and Anden at a younger age, but Kaul Sen at the peak of his power, Grandma Kaul before she passed away, and Hilo and Shae as Academy-aged teenagers. I also wanted to provide a rare glimpse of the Ayt family, as well as the fractured friendship between Ayt Yu and Kaul Sen. Most of all, though, I wanted to spend more time with Lan, to see him as a young man and connect the threads of his character to the kind of leader he would become.

BETTER THAN JADE

KAUL HILOSHUDON had had enough milkshakes to last the rest of his life. He was grateful when the Mountain clan finally showed up, on the eighth day after the opening of the Jiggy Rockets diner. A foreign-style eatery opening up in Janloon was such a novelty that the location was immediately popular, with lines stretching around the block, but it was situated right along the territorial border between North Sotto and the Stump. No one was surprised when two senior Fingers of the Mountain clan arrived and made an attempt to barge in and pressure the owner to switch allegiance.

They were not trivial fighters, but they were no match for the Maik brothers. Kehn broke one man's arm and two of his ribs. Tar cut the other across the face, blinding him in one eye. Together, the brothers gained four jade studs, two jade rings, and a jade pendant.

Hilo was a little disappointed that he didn't have much to do, but he was happy to see his friends win jade, as their family needed it more than he did if they were to rise in the No Peak clan. After the defeated Mountain Green Bones retreated to their own territory, the three Fists stood around Hilo's Duchesse Tourna, drinking their melting milkshakes and talking about the fight. Hilo decided that with Kehn and Tar in such a good mood, now was the right time to say what had been on his mind.

"I have something to ask both of you, but mostly Kehn, since he's the eldest." Hilo tossed the remnants of his milkshake into a garbage bin, sat down on the hood of the Duchesse, and took out a pack of cigarettes. "I want to take your sister on a date. I like her, but we never really get to talk much or spend time together alone. I'll take her somewhere nice and treat her well."

The Maiks went instantly silent. The easy camaraderie vanished and a sudden uncomfortable tension hung in the air, as heavy as the spring damp on the sidewalks.

The brothers hadn't failed to notice the way Hilo's eyes lingered on Wen, the smiles and casual passing compliments he paid to her. Most concerning of all was the way she encouraged his interest in a host of subtle ways. In the mornings, she was up before they were, making and packing three lunches. When Hilo arrived to pick up Kehn and Tar, she always walked out to the Duchesse personally instead of handing the lunch boxes to one of her brothers. When they returned, no matter the hour, even if it was in the middle of the night, she had chilled mint tea and snacks ready so he would be tempted to come into the house and stay for a few minutes before returning to his family's estate. She didn't act meek or awed, but she dressed to please him, she remembered small details about his preferences in everything from food to music, and she asked after his family, calling him "Hilo-jen," the way her brothers did.

Kehn and Tar frowned behind their sister's back but they couldn't blame Wen—she was barely twenty years old, with girlish dreams of being noticed by the eligible son of the Kaul family—but they were starting to worry that when she was inevitably heartbroken, it might mar the men's friendship. Already, it was a sore issue in the Maik family. Just last week, their mother had snapped: "You stupid girl, you think you have a chance with someone like him? You'll only embarrass yourself and your brothers. Are you so selfish you'd risk their good standing with the future Horn?"

Hilo could sense the Maiks' misgivings from the sudden tightness of their jade auras, even if it hadn't already been obvious on their faces. He put a cigarette in his mouth and passed the pack to each of them, then offered his lighter. "I'm not interested in her just as some pretty girl, to have a bit of fun with for a short while," he explained. "She's your sister; do you think I'd disrespect my fellow Fists like that? I want to get to know her better, is all. If you say no, I won't bring it up again."

Kehn and Tar exchanged a glance in the way they did sometimes when they communicated silently only with each other, excluding even Hilo. Kehn spoke a touch sullenly. "Hilo-jen, why are you trying to convince us to go along with something that doesn't make any sense? You're going to be the Horn someday, you know what that means."

"What does it mean?"

"You can't marry a stone-eye." The sharp rise in Kehn's voice made it clear he resented being forced into the position of stating the obvious. When

Hilo became Horn, Kehn would be his First Fist, but he was also Wen's eldest brother and the head of the Maik family, despite being only twenty-four years old. "I'll obey your orders in anything else," Kehn said, his broad shoulders hunched as he stared at a spot somewhere on the ground between them, "but Wen is unfortunate enough as it is. If you get her hopes up by giving her your attention, it'll only hurt her and make it even less likely she'll find a husband someday." Before Hilo could respond, he went on, unrushed but determined. "People look down on the Maik name, but if Tar and I prove ourselves green enough in the clan, there's no reason Wen can't have a respectable and happy life. I won't let her fall into becoming some man's toss-away mistress, even if that man is you, Hilo-jen."

It was perhaps one of the longest speeches Hilo had ever heard from Kehn. There was no threat voiced, but there was enough reluctant tension in Kehn's face to suggest one could arise, if it came to that. Tar sucked furiously on his cigarette, shifting his weight and looking anxiously between them, fearful at the prospect of having to choose who to side with.

Color climbed into Hilo's face. "We've been friends since we were kids in the Academy. Why wouldn't I also want your sister to have a good life? So what if she's a stone-eye? Not all men are so superstitious they can't see other good qualities in a person." He hopped off the hood of the Duchesse with a fierce scowl. "My grandda used to give me shit for hanging out with the two of you, don't you know? There were other guys, sons of his cronies, that he said I should be friends with instead. Either I never told you, or I did and you've forgotten."

Both of the Maiks averted their gazes in embarrassment. Hilo softened his tone. "When I wouldn't listen, he had to give up trying to tell me who I ought to spend time with. It would be the same thing with a woman. A man can't ignore his feelings about something important, no matter what. The only people who need to agree are the two of you, and Lan. And Wen, of course. Who knows, maybe she won't even like me and then it won't matter. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. I want to take her out on a proper date and see how it goes, that's all."

Tar said, "I don't have any problem with it, Hilo-jen."

Kehn remained silent for several seconds. Then he grumbled, "I think if I say no, Wen would find out somehow and never forgive me. Then I'll have stood up to you for nothing."

Hilo's serious demeanor vanished. He grinned lopsidedly and threw an arm over Kehn's large shoulders. "I didn't have any choice but to bring it up. You would've become suspicious soon enough, and I would've had to fear for my life. If you weren't the sort of brothers who'd gut me for making a wrong move, we wouldn't be friends in the first place." He opened the car door, in a cheerful mood now that the conversation had been had and he'd gotten what he wanted. "Come on, let's go to the jade setter's shop and get your new green reset."



THAT EVENING, KEHN gave the news to Wen as if delivering an unwanted court summons. "Kaul Hilo's going to ask you out sometime. He asked our permission already." He didn't smile as he said it. "I said it was okay. What else could I do?"

Wen managed not to react much in the moment, but her eyes widened.

"Don't read too much into it, it's just a first date. Just because he sees you every day and is friendly to you doesn't mean you should get carried away with ideas." Kehn was always reasonable and even-tempered. Wen noticed that Tar, who was usually the talkative one, was staying conspicuously silent. "Remember, he has plenty of women to choose from, and whether he ends up liking you or not, it's going to become awkward. Think of us, too, and don't make a fuss, no matter what happens."

Wen ran into her room, threw herself onto the bed, and screamed into a pillow so her brothers and mother couldn't hear. She knew they were acting out of a mixture of self-interest and misguided kindness by trying to lower her expectations, but they weren't seeing things clearly. Kehn and Tar followed Kaul Hilo because he wasn't a man of half measures. So why would he be any different in this situation? Why would the future Horn of No Peak risk any sort of discord with his closest Fists and the disapproval of his own family unless he felt strongly? It would be much easier for him to have any other woman that caught his eye. No, Kehn was wrong. This date was no casual test; it was the most important thing to ever happen to her.

Nevertheless, Wen went about feigning pleasant equanimity, though she lived in a state of maddening suspense for the next thirty-six hours until

Firstday morning, when, as usual, Hilo rolled up to their house in his Duchesse Tourna and honked the horn for Kehn and Tar. When he saw Wen coming out the door behind her brothers, his eyes lit up. Wen felt her heart catch inside her throat, although she smiled perfectly normally.

“Wen,” Hilo called out. “Are you busy on Fifthday evening?” When she said she wasn’t, his smile grew. The warmth of it shot through her like a bolt of lightning on a clear day. “I’ll come pick you up.” He said it so blithely, as if it were something he’d done before, that as they drove away, she nearly had a hard time believing he’d said it at all.

Wen went to the herbalist’s store. “I’m suffering from stress and anxiety,” she told the woman behind the counter. “Is there anything you can give me to help me relax and sleep better?” She left the store with special tea leaves and a packet of dark powder.

On Thirdday afternoon, she ambushed Vang Suya at the bus stop near the woman’s workplace. “Miss Vang?” Wen exclaimed, jumping up from the bench where she’d been pretending to wait for the same bus. “What a surprise to run into you like this. I’m sure you don’t remember me, but we met briefly at the clan New Year’s party last year.” The Vangs were a No Peak family and Suya was the niece of a councilman.

“Ah...yes...it’s nice to see you again,” Suya said slowly, squinting at Wen with an obvious lack of recognition, which was of no surprise, as they had not actually spoken before. Wen had only ever seen the woman from a distance before investigating her. Now she was standing up close and fighting down waves of jealousy. Suya was a year older than her and effortlessly beautiful, with ideally curved proportions, flawless skin, and a full, sensual mouth. Her nail polish and lipstick matched perfectly. A designer brand handbag was slung over her shoulder and she carried herself with confident grace.

Wen said, “You know my brothers of course, Maik Kehn and Maik Tar.”

At this, Suya blinked in understanding, and her hand twitched up to her face. She clearly did know of the Maiks and their stone-eye sister. Reflexively, she’d moved to tug on her earlobe to ward off bad luck, but she quickly turned the rude motion into one of tucking her hair back under her hat. “Of course. How’s your family, Miss Maik?”

“They’re well, and please call me Wen. The gods must be taking pity on me to place me in your path today.” She gave the other young woman an eager, imploring smile. “You work as a secretary at an accounting office, don’t you? I’m hoping to get a secretarial job as well. I know it’ll be very hard for me, and I haven’t had much success so far, but I’m determined to try my hardest.” She let her voice fall along with her gaze. “Would you be so kind and generous as to sit down with me over tea to give me your advice? I promise not to take much of your time. I’ll even bring the tea and sweets.”

Suya hesitated, but her charitable nature got the better of her. Besides, it couldn’t hurt to do a favor for the Maik family, who had a shameful history, but whose fortunes seemed on a remarkably steep rise, with two strong Green Bone sons who were gaining an impressive reputation.

They met in a park in North Sotto after Suyu got off work the following afternoon, as the weather had turned pleasantly dry, and neither of their families had to be made uncomfortable by the association. Old men were playing circle chess at the other public tables and benches around them. “What an interesting taste,” Suyu said, sipping the tea that Wen brewed in the cup from a thermos of steaming hot water. “What type of leaf is this?”

“It’s imported from Espenia,” Wen explained. “The tea shop told me it’s becoming more popular. You’re supposed to sprinkle this powdery spice on top.”

After Wen had asked a number of questions about Suyu’s job and listened avidly to her advice about résumés and interviewing, she thanked the other woman profusely and said, “I’m grateful to have the chance to talk to you. You have far more experience for someone not much older than me. Is it also true that you’re dating Kaul Hiloshudon?” She bit her lip quickly, seeming abashed. “You don’t have to answer me.”

Suyu’s speech and movements had become increasingly expansive and relaxed. Her cheeks were rosy and she was smiling warmly and guilelessly, her eyes faintly glassy. “Ah, well, about that.” She laughed a touch uncomfortably. “I was, but we’re broken up now. It’s just as well. I don’t think I would’ve liked to live in the spotlight of a family like the Kauls.”

Wen already knew that Hilo had dated Suyu for half a year and that the relationship had ended four months ago. She’d heard about it in passing from her brothers, though they weren’t aware of how despondent she’d been at the former news, nor how relieved at the latter. Wen thought about how

Suya's soft, shapely pink lips had already touched Hilo's lips, how his naked body had laid on top of hers and inside her, and she had to pinch the skin of her own leg under the table to stop herself from feeling physically ill with jealousy. She offered the woman the last of the mango tarts she'd baked from scratch, and leaned forward with conspiratorially girlish interest. "What's he like? I see him with my brothers, but I'm too intimidated to bring myself to talk to him. He seems so intense. Does he have a private, softer side? Is he romantic?"

"He's *exhausting*." Suya giggled. "In more ways than one. Always moving or talking and expecting everyone else to keep up with him. He does have a romantic side, though, I'll admit that." Hilo's ex-girlfriend shook her head—a bit wistfully, Wen thought. "He could be needy, though. When we were together, he talked so much and asked so many questions—what was my favorite food, what type of car did I like, what did I enjoy about my job, could I imagine myself as the wife of the Horn? And always going on about the clan—this or that skirmish, who's won or lost jade, who's gained the upper hand in some territory. Of course, my family's loyal to No Peak, but who has the energy to pay attention to all that, or to care? Men! Always obsessed with Green Bone things."

No wonder Hilo had ended the relationship, Wen decided smugly. Vang Suyu was beautiful but emotionally unavailable and boring, not deeply interested in other people or the things that really mattered to them. Wen relaxed and took a small sip from her own, much weaker cup of tea. "Families like the Kauls seem so different from ordinary people like us, but they're still human after all, so I can't help but wonder what they're really like behind all that jade. Even though it didn't work out, now you have plenty of stories you can tell at parties to make other women curious." She brightened, as if in spontaneous playful inspiration. "Let me guess something about Kaul Hilo and you tell me if it's true or not." She tapped her chin. "I bet he's the sort who phones every day, even to say nothing."

"Yes, that's very true." Suyu laughed.

Wen smiled slyly. "The life of a Fist is unpredictable, so he must have habits or preferences that he sticks to all the time. A restaurant where he eats every week, or a favorite brand of cigarettes, or a store where he buys dozens of the same shirts."

Suya jumped at the chance to lightly disparage her ex-boyfriend. “You’re right about the cigarettes! It’s always the same expensive Espenian brand. But not the shirts. He did have a favorite restaurant for a while, but it went out of business and he’s been grumpy about it ever since—kept saying he couldn’t find a new favorite.”

They went back and forth a little longer, and Wen brought the conversation back to the topic of her fictitious job hunt before her interest in Hilo would seem unusual.

“You’ve given me more time than I deserve,” she said to Suyu before they parted. “If I’m able to overcome my unluckiness and reach my goals, it’ll be thanks to you.”

“It was nothing,” Suyu said, much friendlier with Wen than she had been initially. “Thank you for the tea and snacks. I hope what I’ve said helps you get what you want.”



HILLO WAS MORE nervous than he let on. Luckily for him, the Seven Ones biker gang had undergone a recent violent change in leadership and was causing excessive noise and disorder in the Forge district as well as skimping on their tribute payments. Forcefully bringing them back into line kept Hilo occupied for most of the week and prevented him from dwelling too impatiently and apprehensively on his upcoming date with Wen.

He wanted to take her somewhere nice, the best restaurant he could find—but he also didn’t want anyone to notice them in public together. Word would get back to his grandfather or his brother, and the last thing he wanted was their interference, or for any unwelcome attention to fall on the Maiks at this early stage. Although he’d acted nonchalant about his interest in Wen when he’d spoken to Kehn and Tar, he was entirely aware that he couldn’t misstep in his courtship of her, not if he wished to retain the friendship and loyalty of his best Fists, which he did.

On Fifthday evening, when he pulled up to the familiar door, Wen came out in a simple but attractive red dress, gold earrings, and wedge-heel sandals. Her makeup was subtle but highlighted the elegant shape of her eyes. She got into the passenger side seat of the Duchesse and smiled at him

without saying a word. Hilo smiled back, then began to drive. He and Wen had spoken often, but always in the company of her brothers. Now that they were alone, he found himself curiously and uncharacteristically unsure of what to say to start the conversation. So he said what was on his mind.

“You look beautiful, Wen. Do you know red is one of my favorite colors? Listen, I’ve been wanting to take you out for a while, but we need to get something out of the way first. Don’t feel like you have to see me or be nice to me just because of your brothers. I don’t want you to think that. Kehn and Tar are my Fists no matter what, so you should always be honest with me and not worry about them.”

Wen said, “I’m not worried. I’m only jealous of them spending more time with you than I ever could, but I’m also thankful knowing the three of you are too close to let anything get in between your brotherhood as Green Bones, including me. Tonight, let’s just enjoy ourselves and not spare a thought to what anyone else might be thinking.” She said all this breezily, but Hilo could Perceive her raised pulse.

“That’s what I want too,” he agreed with a grin, and drove them to the waterfront in the Docks, where he’d booked a finely appointed private boat and arranged for a catered dinner for two to be served on board while they sailed leisurely in the calm waters around Gosha Island. The chef brought out ginger seafood soup, seaweed salad, and grilled fish with sesame orange glaze. Hilo had a beer and Wen a fruity hoji cocktail. Wall sconces lit the cozy cabin, far from the street noise of the city.

Their initial nervousness disappeared quickly, and they talked freely about any subject that came into their minds. Wen was already familiar with her brothers’ lives, so she listened with interest and understanding as he spoke of turning the Seven Ones and the Reds against each other to prevent either of the biker gangs from growing too bold. She told him about how, after receiving some recent advice from a friend, she was considering seeking a secretarial job.

“What makes you want to do that?” he asked.

“I think I’d be good at it. I’m organized, I have an excellent memory, and I can type quickly.” Wen set down her chopsticks. “But that’s not the only reason. Kehn and Tar have been working so hard for years to overcome the lowness of our family name. I want to be of help to them, instead of a burden. Even if it’s in a minor way, I want to prove that I can be of use to

my family, that even a stone-eye can make their own luck.” She gazed at him calmly, but he could tell she was watching his reaction apprehensively. It was the first time they’d broached the topic of her deficiency. “I know it might be a foolish hope.”

“It’s not foolish at all,” Hilo told her. Sharply, he added, “If I saw someone tugging their earlobe at you, I’d break their fucking fingers.”

A surprisingly fierce sense of affection and protectiveness was already taking root inside of him. Wen was very different from his last girlfriend. Suya was undeniably attractive in a customary way, but every detail and movement of Wen’s face—from the tilt of her dark eyebrows to the puckish corners of her mouth—hinted at something more going on behind her gaze. Suya came from a family of status in No Peak; she was pleasant, agreeable, self-absorbed, contented. Wen was scorned for being a stone-eye, yet that did not stop her from nursing a desire to rise above expectations and be of help to her brothers. It was a common trait of the Maik siblings, perhaps, to be unusually devoted and resilient. To not lie down, and to take no shit from the world.

After dinner, they stood on the deck of the boat, Hilo enjoying a cigarette that he shared with her as they leaned against the railing, admiring the skyline of Janloon. He took off his jacket and wrapped it around Wen’s shoulders to ward off the spring chill as they sailed back to shore. He was pleased that she accepted the chivalrous gesture from him so easily. When she’d gotten into the car earlier, she hadn’t questioned where they were going. She hadn’t protested the indulgence of the rented boat and the private meal. She trusted him; she noticed and welcomed the things he did to show her care.

Hilo drove her back home and walked her to the door. He very much wanted to end the night by kissing her, but he could Perceive Kehn’s and Tar’s alertly suspicious jade auras inside the house and knew they could Perceive him clearly in turn. Instead, he said, “From now on, keep your Fifthday evenings free. If you can’t, tell me and I’ll change my schedule.”

Wen wrapped both of her hands around one of his. “I will,” she promised solemnly, and went inside the house. Hilo walked back to the Duchesse with a lightness in his chest and a surge of energy in his head that felt almost like the rush of new jade.



BY THEIR FOURTH date, Hilo was in love but didn't say so. He was confident Wen's feelings for him were sincere as well, but if he confessed now, she would think he was angling for sex. He *did* want sex—his desire was at times so unbearable that he entertained irrational fantasies of sending Kehn and Tar on false assignments and stranding them somewhere so he could sneak into their house to ravish their little sister to his heart's content. He fantasized about her smooth legs wrapped around his waist, her pale breasts dangling in his face, her hot mouth on his body.

He was being very careful. With any other woman, he wouldn't be advancing so slowly, but this situation was different. As a Fist, he accepted and embraced risk as part of his daily existence, but with Wen, he wanted everything to go right. It was going to be difficult enough to force the issue with tyrannical old Grandda and prudent, upright Lan. He had to be extra certain of his feelings and hers. He certainly couldn't sleep with her carelessly without offending her brothers, perhaps disastrously so.

"I'm not ashamed to be seen with you. I don't want you to think that, ever," he insisted one night when they were alone on a quiet lawn of the Garrison House & Gardens, a historic mansion and public gardens with a romantic view of the city. They'd dined in a private room at the Grand Island Grill & Lounge earlier that evening. "I just don't want anyone in the clan bothering us or saying things to my family, not yet."

"I understand." She leaned her head on his shoulder.

He wasn't satisfied by her quick reply and felt the need to explain further. "My grandda's not just the Pillar. He's the Torch of Kekon, a national war hero who's used to bossing everyone around and having his way, and he's got all these strict ideas. Things will get better when Lan becomes Pillar."

Wen gazed intently into his eyes. The city's nighttime glow illuminated her upturned face and the set of her mouth. "I know my position," she told him. "You have to become the Horn of No Peak and help your brother to keep the clan strong. Kehn and Tar will be your First and Second Fists. Nothing can jeopardize that. If I can stay with you, of course I will. If not, I'll still have no regrets."

Hilo's heart swelled as he pulled her close. He kissed her cheeks and forehead, her jaw and neck, and finally her lips, soft and slightly chilled. Wen trailed her fingers down his throat until she reached the four jade studs embedded in the skin of his collarbone, causing him to gasp at her fearlessness. She traced his jade, circling each piece with her thumbs, her body straining toward him.



"I'M MOVING OUT," Wen told her brothers. "I found myself an apartment already."

They stared at her, nonplussed. "How're you going to pay rent?" Tar exclaimed.

"I got a job last week," she said. "It's a secretarial position at a law firm." She delivered the news with matter-of-fact blitheness, on a boring Seventhday morning while their mother was away, as if it was no big deal. She wanted Kehn and Tar to accept her decision without concern or protest. "Like Ma says, it's about time I made some use of myself. And this house was always too small for all of us."

Her situation had become intolerable. Out of respect, Hilo was not going to have sex with her in her family's house. They couldn't go to the Kaul estate; that wasn't how either of them wanted her to first appear to his family. She waited for him to take her to a hotel room, or to simply pin her to the back seat of his car, but it hadn't happened yet; perhaps he thought that would be unbecoming. Wen was beyond frustrated and tired of coming home from their dates to finger herself in the bathtub, squirming her hips under the handheld showerhead. She needed to take action.

"You don't have to do that," Kehn said with a frown. "Tar and I are both Fists who will rise in the clan. We can take care of you and Ma. We can get a bigger house—maybe not this year, but next year for sure."

"I don't need you to take care of me," Wen said. "I may be a stone-eye, but I'm perfectly capable of working and supporting myself."

Tar snickered loudly. "You're doing this so you can lure Hilo-jen to your secret love nest, aren't you?" He wagged his tongue at her, and she gave him a caustic look for his crudeness, despite the accuracy of his statement.

“Is it so wrong to want my own private space, now that I’m a grown woman?” she replied with unassailable reasonableness as she cleared their small kitchen table of dishes. “You were so worried about me seeing him, thinking it wouldn’t work, or that it would cause problems for you. Has it?”

They were forced to admit nothing had changed between them and their captain. “But you’ve only been seeing him for a few months,” Kehn pointed out cautiously. He rubbed the back of his neck. “How...how is it going, anyway?” he asked uncomfortably.

Wen gave him an innocent smile. “Why don’t you ask him yourself?” She knew they probably wouldn’t, but if they did, they might be reassured that she wasn’t merely dreaming of love, that it was real. Kehn and Tar might not believe her word alone, but they trusted Kaul Hilo in everything.



HILLO WAS AGHAST. “This place is tiny. It’s not good enough for you. The neighborhood isn’t very nice, either. You’re going to live here by yourself?” He turned a disapproving circle in the middle of her new apartment in Paw-Paw, taking in the dusty corners, unpainted walls, and unpacked boxes surrounding them.

“It’ll be perfectly fine once I clean it up and decorate it,” Wen assured him. She already had ideas for how to lighten up the space and make it seem bigger, and she relished the idea of buying new furniture and decor to her taste.

Hilo appeared not to have heard her. “I’ll talk to Kehn,” he grumbled, half to himself. “He should’ve moved you all to a bigger house by now, but obviously he didn’t think about that. If money’s the issue, I’ll go to the Horn. We may be junior Fists, but we’ve earned more jade than most, so Kehn and Tar deserve a reward anyway.”

“That’s good of you to suggest,” Wen said, “but don’t do it on my account. I’ve already used my signing bonus to pay for the first three months of rent.”

“Why didn’t you talk to me first?” Hilo demanded, sounding more hurt than she’d expected. “I could’ve helped you. The clan owns apartment

buildings. We have Lantern Men landlords. Didn't you think about that before settling for this dump?"

"Don't call it a dump," Wen said, a bit angrily. "It doesn't look like much to you, but it's the first home I'll be able to call my own. Isn't that a good enough reason?" She took his hands. "Maybe someday we'll make these sorts of decisions together. But for now, I'm happy with my new apartment, so you should be happy for me too."

She saw him relenting—the softness coming in his expressive eyes, the subtle slackening of his jawline and the slow lopsided tug of a smile on his mouth. She'd spent so much time watching him, studying his face, his every habit of speech and gesture. She felt like a scientist with a singular specialization in observing Kaul Hiloshudon.

"Let me show you the rest of it," she said, pulling him into the bedroom, which contained the only piece of furniture she'd already purchased. It had been delivered and installed that morning. Hilo's initial dismay at the humbleness of her new residence changed as soon as he set eyes on the extra-large bed. Wen would never possess the extraordinary senses of a Green Bone, but she did not need them to feel his attention swerving. His gaze slid onto her with swift, hungry intensity.

In one fluid motion, he wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her to him sharply, so that she collided with his chest. She was entirely alone with him at last. He was a son of the powerful Kaul family, a heavily jaded warrior with abilities well beyond that of common men. She was physically helpless against him. In that moment, she expected he would push her onto the bed and tear off her clothes. Wen's pulse throbbed in her throat and she trembled with anticipation.

Hilo bent his face into the crook of her neck. Surely, he could Perceive her lust raging like a fever. His hot breath tingled against her skin. "I have to go. Clan things," he murmured reluctantly. Wen remembered with plummeting disappointment that it was a traditional adage on the military side of the clan that Fists and Fingers ought not to get laid right before work. They were expected to be alert and ready to fight—not relaxed and hoping for a nap. "I'll be back later tonight," he promised.

When he was gone—after opening the fifth-story window and dropping Lightly off the fire escape—Wen sighed and spent the next several hours cleaning and scrubbing the floors and counters, then unpacking

clothes and towels, personal items, and kitchen supplies. She paused to eat a cup of instant noodles and to periodically check the clock and wonder when Hilo would return. Time passed excruciatingly slowly.

Wen showered, inserted the diaphragm and spermicide she'd been practicing with for the past week, dressed in new lingerie and a matching green silk dressing gown tied around the waist, and lay down in bed with a book. The city noises outside of her building were different than those of her old neighborhood—less traffic, but more barking dogs and occasionally a drunken raised voice. Her small apartment was warmer and stuffier than she was accustomed to. She got up and cracked open a window.

Around an hour past midnight, Wen's anticipation turned to annoyance and then to worry. The clan's Fists didn't keep regular hours and their lives were unpredictable, but Hilo wouldn't tarry if he could help it. She thought to call her brothers to see if they had made it home, since they would ordinarily be with Hilo, but the electric company wouldn't be arriving to turn on her service until tomorrow afternoon, and furthermore, the new phone she'd purchased was buried somewhere in one of the unopened cardboard boxes.

Twenty minutes later, just as she was about to turn the lights back on, get dressed, and venture out in search of the nearest pay phone, there was a knock on her door. Hilo's voice called, softly but anxiously, "Are you still awake?" Wen flung open the door and gasped at the sight of him in the hallway, his right eye blackened, his lip swollen, the left sleeve of his shirt soaked with blood.



"I'M OKAY, IT'S not as bad as it looks, and some of this blood isn't mine," Hilo reassured her quickly as he came into the apartment and closed the door behind him. He hadn't meant to alarm her. In fact, he'd considered going home to shower and change first, but after visiting an urgent care clinic to have his wound treated, then dropping off Kehn and Tar at their house, it was late into the night. He was already in Paw-Paw, and going to his family's house in Palace Hill and then coming all the way back would've cost him at least forty-five minutes.

Wen sank to the carpet in a puddle of green silk and relief. Seeing her worry touched Hilo greatly. He crouched down next to her, grasped her chin in his hand and gave her a sunny kiss to convince her he really was fine.

“Are Kehn and Tar all right?” she asked.

“I would’ve told you right away if they weren’t.”

Wen nodded and the color returned to her face. She said briskly, “You can tell me about what happened while I get you a cold towel for that eye.”

Wen was well practiced at getting blood out of her brothers’ clothes. She filled the sink with cold water and grabbed the hydrogen peroxide from her freshly stocked bathroom cabinet. As there was no furniture in the kitchen yet, Hilo sat on the counter, holding a cold compress to his face and watching out of one eye as she unbuttoned his blood-caked shirt and drew it off his shoulders. Wen wet a kitchen towel and gently wiped away the dried blood on his arms and chest. The gash above his left pectoral had been stitched and bandaged but he was embarrassed by the evidence of his overconfidence, which had made him a second too slow to Steel himself. He resolved that it wouldn’t happen again.

As Wen put his shirt in the sink to soak, he explained that earlier that evening, an unfortunate misunderstanding over territorial jurisdictions had turned into a confrontation with a few hot-headed members of the minor Three Run clan. The issue was resolved, but the Fist from Three Run had been rude and disrespectful, sneering and spitting insults at the younger No Peak Green Bones. Since when did a minor clan, even a wealthy and rapidly growing one like Three Run, think it could get away with acting better than No Peak? Hilo had offered a clean blade and a duel was fought on the spot.

Wen nodded, but to his surprise, tears pooled in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Hilo exclaimed. “I said everything’s fine, didn’t I?”

“You’re fine tonight, thank the gods,” she said. “But you’re a junior Fist. It won’t be long before you become a senior Fist. Someday, you’ll be the Horn of the clan. Many others will try to hurt you, and as a stone-eye, there’s nothing I can do.”

Hilo dropped the cold pack and jumped off the counter. He didn’t feel injured or tired at all. He might be sore tomorrow, but right now, he blazed with energy and felt as if he could fight again at that second. Wen was so alluring in those skimpy items she’d put on just for him, but she was getting them wet and stained without any care. She wasn’t frightened or intimidated

by the night's events, only angry at those who hurt him even in a minor way. Seeing her upset on his account made Hilo nearly desperate.

He seized her by the shoulders and turned her toward him. "I'll beat all of them, so you won't have to worry. I'll always come back to you. Look." He dug in his front pants pocket and pulled out four pieces of jade he'd claimed from his opponent. The man had been intelligent enough to surrender before passing out, thus losing only his jade and quite a lot of blood but not his whole life.

Hilo took Wen's hand and dropped the precious green gems into her palm. "I won these tonight, from a man who hoped I'd be lying dead in the street right now instead of here with you. Now his jade is mine. Tomorrow, I'm going to set them here"—he tapped his studded collarbone—"and use them to take down anyone else who tries the same." He took her face between his hands and stared steadily into her glistening eyes. "Do you believe me, Wen?"

"I believe you." She closed her fingers around the jade, bringing it to her chest as if she held a piece of his heart in her fist. "And I believe *in* you. I love you."

The smile she aimed up at him was bright and certain. No jade aura emanated from her body, but her passion and honesty streamed as pure and bright in his mind as any energy his Perception had ever touched.

"I love you too," he said, without hesitation. "More than anything."

They kissed with fierce abandon. Wen clung to his bare chest as they stumbled together into the bedroom. She paused only to place his new jade trophies carefully upon a closet shelf before they fell onto the bed, frantic with ardor. Hilo unwrapped her from the silk dressing gown and dropped it onto the floor. Wen scooted away from him, unclasped her bra, slid her panties off, and stretched out across the bedspread, her arms extended invitingly over her head.

Hilo crawled over the bed to her, dizzy with lust. She was so soft and naked and beautiful, so willingly vulnerable to him. Kissing her deeply, he pushed off his pants and pressed the entire length of his body down on hers. Every inch of skin on skin between them lit up hot and charged. Wen squirmed beneath him, her breasts and hips and the soft tickle of her pubic hair igniting every nerve ending and scrambling his mind of thought. His cock strained insistently, but remembering that Wen had been waiting all

evening past midnight for him, he forced himself not to give in. By now, he'd been building up the idea of making love to her for long enough that he was sure to feel regretful later if he rushed.

So he kissed her deeply, caressed her smooth body, touched her between the legs. "I'm never going to forgive Kehn and Tar," he murmured in jest against her neck. "If it wasn't for them, I'd have taken you a dozen times already. I've been a horny mess for weeks." She laughed in soft delight at his admission and nibbled his ear. She was already wet, and her breathing was growing rapid.

Hilo pressed his face between her breasts, sucked each of her dark nipples, trailed his mouth down her belly to her navel. He pushed her knees apart and explored her with his mouth and fingers. Wen's thighs were shaking; she let out a mewling moan as he stroked inside her and it occurred to him fleetingly that it was a good thing he'd had practice with Suyu so he could do a better job when it counted. He meant to draw her enjoyment out more, but she pressed her hips down hard, seemingly involuntarily, and then went limp with a shudder, a weak, inexperienced climax from excitement and nerves.

She sat up and clung to him. "I'm sorry, with what you were doing, I couldn't help it," she whispered against his chest, still trembling, but he laughed. "Next time will be better," he promised, and unable to wait any longer, he pushed her back down and entered her with one hard plunge.

Wen sucked in a sharp breath of pleasure and pain. He held still, a question in his eyes until her lips parted in a dazed smile and she moved against him, urging him to continue. He rocked forward, his eyes rolling back in his head. She was indescribable. The wet heat and pressure engulfing his cock seemed to radiate through his whole body. Hilo's jade senses were soaring; he could perceive the thunderous rush of Wen's blood and the throb of her heart, and her lust was as palpable as the tang of her sweat on his tongue. She was pure sexual energy; she was sensation incarnate. He tried to pay attention to everything, to slow down, to look into her face and kiss her and show her that he loved her, but his body was a sports car racing for a cliff. Wen's mouth was clamped onto his nipple and she was jerking her hips.

"*Gods*," Hilo gasped, and careened into an uncontrollable climax.

He was more exhausted from the fight and his injuries and the long night than he'd thought; he muttered something hopelessly affectionate but

unintelligible before losing consciousness.

When he awoke, hours had passed. Dawn was beginning to lighten the room. His injured eye felt heavy in its socket. Wen's lips were gliding over his cock. He lay still. How did she know to use her mouth and hands together like that? Pleasure rolled unstoppably through his body, chasing away all lingering fatigue. He put a hand on the back of her head and guided her as the pressure mounted. After he came in her mouth, he sat up and said, with a silly, addled grin, "You ought to be careful, Wen. Do you really want to spoil me right away? What if I want to wake up to being sucked off every morning from now on?"

He sprang at her so suddenly she yelped. Hilo pinned her to the bed while sliding the first two fingers of his other hand inside her. Wen was beaming, rested, more relaxed now; when he spread her legs wide, she lay back on the pillows and he took his time, enjoying her escalating whimpers as he worked his tongue and fingers over her folds, paying attention to every bit of tender skin around the tight cluster of nerves. She dug her fingers into his hair and whispered, "Keep going, I'm close, I'm close," until he felt her clench; she bucked and came with a back-arching cry. By then, he'd recovered his energy and was hard again. When he entered her this time, she was like a sexual inferno, writhing against him so wildly that even half-spent, he couldn't hold out for long. "You're going to drain me dry," he told her cheerfully.

They fell asleep again and woke hungry. The fridge was still empty, and Hilo's shirt remained a sodden reddish-brown mess in the sink, so Wen dressed and went out to get them a meal of steamed buns and barbecue meat on skewers from a nearby food stall. While she was out, Hilo examined himself in the mirror of the apartment's small bathroom. The skin around his eye was purplish and tender to the touch, and one side of his upper lip was fatter than the other. He was relieved it didn't look too bad, though he was still chagrined that on a special night Wen had had to see him looking anything less than his best.

When she returned, they ate, sitting close together on the bare kitchen floor. She finished washing his shirt and hung it out the window to dry. Revived by the meal, and by seeing Wen in clothes that he wanted to remove all over again, he carried her back into the bedroom without a word, lifted her skirt and yanked off her panties. He brought her to the edge of the

precipice before entering her again. In half a dozen strokes, she came on him, crying out and clenching him with pulsing waves. The edge of his ravenous sexual appetite had already been sated, so they could take their time now, spending the rest of the leisurely afternoon further exploring the buffet of each other's bodies.

That night, they went out and ate at a noodle stand, then went to the jade setter's together, where Hilo had his four new pieces of jade carved down and set into the skin of his collarbone next to the others he already possessed. Wen sat on a stool nearby, watching him with a dreamy look of pride and adoration. They were both happily sore and muddle-headed, sex drunk. Hilo didn't even care anymore if anyone saw them together and told his grandfather. He was going to marry Wen. Grandda and Lan would simply have to accept it. The piercings stung, but the jade energy humming through his body and mixing with the feelings of true love were together sunshine on his soul.

They went back to her apartment and he helped her to open and unpack boxes. When they found the phone and plugged it in, it rang within fifteen minutes. Hilo leaned in the doorway of the kitchen, arms crossed, grinning at her as she breezily told Kehn that all was well, she'd just been busy getting settled into the new apartment, and there was no need for him to come over to help.

They made love again, for the seventh time. Tomorrow he would have to return to his duties as a Fist and Wen had to go to work. He was not sure either of them would be able to walk properly. The thought that Kehn and Tar might notice his discomfort and surmise the exact cause was mildly worrisome and greatly amusing. As he lay with Wen in his arms, Hilo felt utterly sexually exhausted and happier than he'd ever been in his life.

He could tell she wasn't asleep yet, but she'd gone quiet, thoughtful. She'd given herself to him so freely and completely; was she worried about what would happen now?

He kissed her bare shoulder. "This is just the start," he promised her. "I'm going to bring you into the clan. I'll make you my wife and give you children."

"I know." She rolled over to face him, their noses nearly touching on the pillow, her luminous eyes pools in the dark. "I was only thinking of how strong I'll have to become, to be with you forever."



This is the story that began the collection, the one that I began writing purely for my own enjoyment. I knew from the time I began writing Jade City that the love story between Kaul Hilo and Maik Wen would be one of the most crucial through lines of the entire trilogy, but those of you who've read Jade Legacy will know by now that their marriage is not always an easy one. I strived to portray Wen and Hilo's relationship in as emotionally authentic a way as possible, for us to see them at their best and their worst together. So often stories focus on the start of a romantic relationship, and less commonly on the end of one; rarely, it seems, do we see a couple in a fantasy novel go through ups and down together, evolve together, age together, stay together. Hilo and Wen complement and enable each other. They love and support each other. They hurt and betray each other. They are strong individuals, but neither would be who they are without the other.

Hilo and Wen are already a couple when we first meet them in Jade City. A young, passionate, ambitious couple to be sure, but because their courtship was not a part of that first book's story arc, I found myself, near the end of writing Jade Legacy, wishing I could've witnessed more of their early days of courtship. When writing the novels of the Green Bone Saga, I'm constantly considering how each event ties into the larger narrative and propels it relentlessly forward. Rarely do I relax and allow these characters to simply live. In a short story like "Better Than Jade," freed from the constant need to advance the plot, there was only the delight of spending time with a young couple madly in love.

GRANDDAUGHTER CORMORANT

THE YGUTANIAN was standing by the bar in a charcoal-gray suit, chatting with another conference attendee. Shae caught only a glimpse of his face in profile, and she couldn't read his name tag from this angle, but the man's yellow beard was recognizable from the photos she'd seen and easy to pick out even in a room with many other foreigners. She made her way casually toward him, as if she was wandering the lobby of the Crown Summit Hotel in the aimless, exploratory manner of a first-time tradeshow attendee, weaving around clusters of socializing businessmen and stopping by one of the vendor tables, where a woman cheerfully handed her a pocket flashlight and a set of coasters emblazoned with corporate logos.

As she approached the faux wood bar, Shae wound her green silk scarf around her neck, discreetly concealing her jade necklace. She had learned that men, especially older men, reacted to the sight of a twenty-two-year-old woman wearing as much jade as a senior Finger in about the same way she imagined they might react to her openly carrying a machine gun—with nervous surprise, unseemly flirtatious interest, and undisguised concern that she might carelessly injure herself or others with such a dangerous weapon, one not made for delicate hands. She didn't know how knowledgeable this foreigner was about Green Bones and jade, but given her mission, she didn't want to put him on edge or arouse his suspicion.

She was trying to think of how to unobtrusively insert herself into the company of the men at the bar when one of the Kekonese attendees glanced down past her neckline to her name tag. "Kaul Shaelinsan," he exclaimed, stepping back and touching his forehead in delighted greeting. "It's a surprise and honor to meet the Pillar's granddaughter. Is Kaul-jen here?" He glanced around the bar eagerly, hoping to see the clan patriarch nearby.

"No," Shae answered, amused by the idea that Kaul Seningtun wouldn't have better things to do on a Fifthday evening than chitchat with tractor

salesmen. Perhaps twenty years ago, that might've been the case, but that had been before Shae's time. The No Peak clan was not so new anymore, and though it was still growing rapidly, reaching out hungrily wherever its influence could extend, the Pillar did not need to be everywhere himself. "He's unable to attend, but the Weather Man and I are here."

"Ah, well, that's understandable. I'll have to go find Yun Dorupon and pay my respects," said the disappointed businessman. He turned his friendly attention back to Shae. He was quite attractive—in his late twenties she guessed, with a clean-shaven jawline made stronger by the sharpness of his navy-blue suit—but he was nothing special, not compared to how Jerald looked in a crisp Espenian military uniform. "May I be the first to buy you a drink, Miss Kaul?" the businessman asked solicitously, motioning her toward the bar and smiling broadly. "I had no idea that you were interested in Kekon's agricultural industry."

Shae had minimal, if any, interest in the AgriKekon Conference, but she smiled back, ignoring the fact that he'd neglected to address her properly; she knew by now that no one thought of her as "Kaul-jen," not when she had a famous grandfather and two older brothers. "It's my goal to learn as much as I can about every area where the No Peak clan has interests, Mr. Hanto," she said, reading off his name tag before looking him in the eyes.

"Of course, of course," Hanto said agreeably. "I think it's very admirable that women are making such great strides in the business world. The Mountain clan has even appointed a woman as Weather Man, so surely women can do anything now. What will you have to drink?"

"Nothing for me, I've already had a drink," Shae lied, brushing aside the offer. She didn't want to encourage this man's attention in any way, even if it was innocuous. Her marriage prospects were a subject of speculation in the clan—what fortunate man would the Torch of Kekon accept as a husband to his beloved granddaughter and as son-in-law in the ruling family of No Peak? Shae grimaced inwardly every time she thought about it.

She softened her rejection of Hanto by glancing around at the gathering and saying, "This is my first time at the conference, and I don't know anyone here. Would you be so kind as to introduce me to people? Who is that tall foreigner with the beard?"

Hanto introduced her to Helvan eya Rostof. The Ygutanian shook Shae's hand firmly but without much warmth, his gaze settling on her with far less interest than Hanto's. "What do you do in the agriculture industry, Mr. Rostof?" she asked.

"I sell fertilizer," he said in halting Kekonese. "Ygutan makes best fertilizer."

Shae accepted his business card. "Is this your first time in Janloon?"

"This, my first trip for...business," he said, raising his voice above the growing din of conversation at the bar. "Very nice city." Rostof was broad as well as tall, his shoulders amply filling out his suit. His eyes were a startlingly bright blue, a touch unnerving to look upon.

"I hope you'll have a chance to see more of Janloon beyond this hotel," Shae said. "How long will you be staying?" She kept her voice mild and friendly as she focused her Perception, trying to blot out all the other distracting energies in the room. People without jade auras stood out less distinctively in her mind's eye, but she concentrated on noticing and remembering Rostof's energy, pale and opaque, emanating like a faint static hum.

"Not long, only five days," Rostof admitted.

She could sense his reticence and thought perhaps she could draw him into conversation another way. "I'm sad to say I haven't been to Ygutan, although I would like to," she admitted regretfully. "What part of the country do you come from? Is it nice there?"

She managed to get a little more talk out of him—he came from Dramsk; he spoke Shotarian in addition to Kekonese, which he'd learned because his company wished to grow its business in the East Amaric region; he was unmarried and childless. Nevertheless, she could tell Rostof was impatient and wanted to move on, perhaps to talk to colleagues and potential buyers who would be more professionally useful to him. As he spoke to her, he glanced down at his watch and his eyes drifted from side to side.

"Ah, there you are, Shae-se." From behind her, Yun Doru's smoky jade aura impinged on Shae's Perception before his reedy voice reached her. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

Shae grimaced, then forced her face into pleasantness before turning around to face the clan's Weather Man. "Yes, Uncle Doru, I'm learning a lot

just from the conversations I'm having." She turned back toward Rostof, only to find that in her moment of inattention, the Ygutanian had slipped away back into the crowd. She caught a glimpse of Rostof's back, moving away from her through the hotel lobby. She cursed Doru silently.

"I'm pleased to hear that," Doru said, interlacing his long fingers. "Industries such as agriculture and transportation may not be very glamorous, but they provide the clan much valuable tributary business. We have experts on each sector in the Ship Street office, but it's important for a good Weather Man to know all the fundamentals." Doru never failed to take the opportunity to expound to her on the responsibilities and methods of a good Weather Man, doling out advice with the patient wisdom of a mentor to a protégé.

What about the things that a good Weather Man doesn't do, Uncle Doru? No matter how much he wished to mend fences with her, how supportive he was of her, how often he told her about the high hopes he and Kaul Sen had for her, she wasn't about to forget what he'd done to Paya, the school friend she no longer spoke to, neither of them able to stomach the shame. Doru was Weather Man of No Peak and her grandfather's closest friend and advisor. Shae had no choice but to publicly respect him, but that didn't mean she would ever forgive him.

"I'm glad I came, Uncle Doru, but I'm getting tired." Shae sagged slightly to make her point. From the corner of her eye, she could see Rostof waiting for the elevator behind a large group of people. "I'm going to walk the exhibit floor for a few minutes, then go home."

Doru nodded his thin head in understanding. "Shall we leave in half an hour?"

"I'll take a taxi. There's no need for you to cut your business here short," Shae assured him. "I know there are plenty of Lantern Men you still need to talk to. Mr. Hanto!" She called out to the businessman and motioned him over insistently, making sure that Doru was occupied accepting Hanto's respectful wishes and enmeshed in conversation before she extricated herself and hurried as quickly as unsuspecting decorum allowed toward Rostof.

She was lucky because the Crown Summit Hotel's small, old elevator was jammed with conference attendees. Rostof, left behind in the lobby as

the door closed on a full load of passengers, gave up his wait and strode around the corner to the stairwell.

Shae caught the stairwell door before it closed and slipped inside after him. Rostof was already past the second-floor landing and headed to the third. She followed more slowly, keeping her Perception trained on the foreigner above and stepping lightly on the balls of her feet so the heels of her black pumps wouldn't clack on the concrete stairs.



A WEEK AGO, Shae had taken the ninety-minute ferry ride to Euman Island and eaten lunch at the Goodtimes Bistro with Jerald and his friend Eli Sterns from ROE military intelligence. When Jerald greeted her with a happy kiss, she blushed and glanced around, even though she knew there wouldn't be any No Peak members in this town where the Espenian military reigned, just like another clan. The wind was calm and the dry autumn air was warm, so they sat on the diner's covered patio with a long view out to the rock-strewn beach. Black cormorants wheeled over the water, plunging beneath the surface for fish.

"Look at those fishermen," Jerald exclaimed curiously, pointing to a traditional Abukei flat-bottomed boat bobbing in the gentle waves. "They're using birds to catch fish. There's a ring around the bird's neck and when they fly back to the boat, the fisherman takes a whole stash of fish out of its throat." Jerald frequently delighted aloud in things that were commonplace to Shae. "Seems kind of unfair to the bird, though, doesn't it?" he added.

"The fishermen use slingshots to chase away other birds in the area, and it's Abukei tradition that the largest fish caught goes to the cormorant. So perhaps the bird doesn't mind." Shae warmed at the proud, approving smile Jerald sent her way. She'd become much more fluent in Espenian over the past few months, practicing with her boyfriend nearly every day, watching Espenian television, reading Espenian romance novels. She felt like a shy schoolgirl holding hands with him under the table, but Jerald seemed completely relaxed about it. She loved that about him: Even though his achingly handsome features and warm brown eyes were Shotarian, his endearingly naive confidence was entirely Espenian.

Eli Sterns sat across from them and followed Jerald's lead in ordering the fried steak. Sterns was a short man, much shorter than most Espenians, with fair, curly hair. He had a relaxed and earnest manner that made it hard to believe that he worked for the largest and most dangerous military in the world. "Lunch is on me," he declared, smiling at both of them with all of his white teeth. "Shae, thank you again for your help checking that list. I owe you, truly. You're toppers, peach."

He made it sound as if they were school classmates and he was repaying her, as Espenians always did, for helping him with homework. In truth, Sterns had been updating a list of all the Green Bone clan leaders who comprised the board of the Kekon Jade Alliance, the national cartel that regulated the country's production and distribution of jade. He explained that the information he had inherited was out-of-date because of changes in clan leadership, minor clans merging or being conquered, and the general secrecy of the clans that meant most happenings among Green Bones were never publicized to outsiders.

"It wasn't any trouble, Eli." And it honestly hadn't been any trouble to look through Doru's secretary's index of contacts and to ask a few questions around the Weather Man's office, where she was expected to be working with the senior Luckbringers and learning about the business of the clan anyway. Filling in the gaps in Sterns' list and correcting the mistakes had been easy, and it wasn't as if any of the information was secret. Jerald had promised it would be a great favor to his friend, and if there was something Shae could do to eventually advance her boyfriend's status among his own people in the ROE military, then she was pleased to do it.

"The fried steak here is fine, but not as good as back home," Jerald said to her when their meals arrived. "One day I'll take you to my favorite fried steak place."

Shae thought the battered, gravy-coated dish was already one of the most sinfully delicious things she'd ever eaten, even though there didn't seem to be anything to balance out the meal besides a basket of thick brown crackers. Eli paused with a fork halfway to his mouth, eyeing Shae curiously. "So, what are the two of you planning to do when Jerald's deployment ends? Would you want to move to Espenia?"

Shae glanced at her hopeful boyfriend, unsure what to say. How could she explain that the day would come when she would have to choose

between leaving him or leaving Kekon, because her grandfather and her clan would never accept a Shotarian-Espenian man into a Green Bone family? She'd been willfully avoiding thinking about the inevitability. "Maybe," she answered slowly. "I *would* like to study at an Espenian university."

"You'd do great in Espenia," Jerald declared. "You can speak so well already."

Sterns finished chewing a mouthful of food and pushed his empty plate aside. He wiped his mouth with a napkin and spoke to Jerald, thoughtfully. "I know we've brought assets over to the ROE on special visas. I could ask around and find out what the process is for that. Just so you have the information."

"Would you, crumb? That would be mass toppers."

Shae said, "What is an asset?" She was unfamiliar with the Espenian word.

"It's what we call our friends overseas, people who answer questions and help us to do business in other countries," Sterns explained. "We repay them for their friendship."

Shae nodded, unsure why Jerald frowned at the description. Coming from a Green Bone clan, she understood perfectly well how loyalty and friendship were valued and rewarded. She joked, "So, I am an asset because I helped you once already, didn't I?"

Sterns laughed, a touch uncomfortably. "I guess you could say that."

"And only if you want to be," Jerald said, squeezing her hand affectionately.

The Espenian agent sat back, seeming to hesitate before speaking. "Actually, there is something else I need help with. But I didn't want to ask for two favors in a row."

In Shae's mind, a dawning realization was turning into cautious speculation. If answering the man's questions made her a friend of Espenia, and the Espenians gave her a visa to study in their country, she would have the solution to her intractable dilemma.

She could convince her grandfather that sending her to get a graduate degree from an Espenian university would benefit No Peak, which was true. She and Jerald could remain together, far from the dogmatic, judgmental, prying eyes of the clan. After more time had passed, she would introduce Jerald to her family as if she'd met him as a student overseas, not as a foreign

serviceman occupying Euman Island. Surely by then, Lan would be Pillar, not Grandda—might he live three hundred years, but in retirement.

Her optimism began to soar. Lan was not like Grandda; he would have concerns, but he would be understanding and reasonable. *It could all work out.* “What do you need?”

“There’s a man coming to Janloon next week for an industry conference.” Eli Sterns leaned forward and lowered his voice. “His name is Helvan eya Rostof. He’s a former Ygutanian soldier and an ex-convict who was sentenced to eight years in a labor camp for drug trafficking, but he was unexpectedly pardoned and released after two years. We believe he has ties to the Ygutanian military and to Ygutanian organized crime syndicates. The people I report to are...concerned. They want to know how long he’s staying here, who he’s meeting with, any indication of what he’s really doing in Janloon.” Agent Sterns paused. Although his soft, friendly face was unchanged, for the first time Shae saw the mercenary cunning in the Espenian’s wintry pale eyes. “The AgriKekon Conference is happening at a hotel in your family’s territory.”



SHAE TOLD HER grandfather that she wanted to accompany the Weather Man to the conference to learn more about the agricultural industry. Kekon’s postwar population was booming and the country needed to feed all the additional people. Kaul Sen was delighted that she was taking an interest in the economic concerns of the clan and the nation at large.

“Shae-se, your birthday is coming up and you’ve been keeping up your studying and training, haven’t you?” He pursed his lips critically, but there was a teasing light in his eyes that Shae knew her brothers rarely saw. “Your necklace ought to have more jade.”

They were walking together in the garden as the sun went down. Lan and Eyni had gone out to the theater. Shae’s mother was out shopping at the night market, and her ailing grandmother had already gone to bed. Who knew what Hilo was doing, since he was rarely at home even when he wasn’t prowling the streets with the Maik brothers and his Fingers.

Shae shrugged. “The Pillar can award jade whenever he wishes, to whomever he wishes, but there’s no rush. It’s not a big fuss to be talked about. Not like jade won in duels.”

Her grandfather frowned at the note of bitterness in her voice, which she’d made only a desultory, failed attempt to conceal. After graduating together from Kaul Du Academy, both she and Hilo had split their time between college courses and working on the military side of the clan. Shae was told to spend eighty percent of her time studying and learning from Doru’s people, and the remaining twenty percent performing the duties of a Finger, dealing with issues that arose in their territories, including dispensing violence when necessary. For Hilo, the reverse was true, and though he never put an extra minute into classes, her brother had skyrocketed through the ranks as a Finger and then a Fist. Last year, he’d killed a more heavily jaded man from the Mountain clan in a dramatic clean-bladed duel and it seemed to Shae that everyone in the clan talked as if he were fucking Baijen reborn.

Kaul Sen stopped at the bench under the cherry tree. He sat down, patting the seat beside him. Shae sat next to him, the wood still warm from the orange evening light that slanted through reddening leaves. Shae noticed that her grandfather’s gray hair was thinning; she could see his pink scalp. “Shae-se,” Kaul Sen said, taking her hand firmly in his rough, papery one, “you could become a Fist if you wanted to, but why would you do that? You will always be as important to the clan as your brothers.”

“By working under Doru and marrying the right man?”

Her grandfather frowned and withdrew his hand. “You’re being unfairly testy with me, Shae-se. We all have our own place and duties. Haven’t I always given you every bit as much as your brothers?”



SHAE TRACKED ROSTOF in her Perception as he exited the hotel stairwell on the fourth floor. She took the rest of the stairs silently, waiting on the other side of the metal door until she sensed the man stop and turn into a room. Only then did she go out into the corridor and walk slowly past the guest suites

until she Perceived the Ygutanian moving around behind the door to room 410.

She backed away and considered what to do. She'd managed to get some personal details out of him in their earlier conversation. She knew exactly where he was staying and for how long. Was that enough to be useful to the Espenians? Jerald and his friend had made it clear that they would be grateful for any information she could provide, but that she should not get too close to Rostof or put herself in any danger. If they wanted to investigate him further, surely they could send their spies to follow him or wiretap his hotel room.

Rostof returned to the door and began to open it.

In the second it took for the man to unbolt the lock and turn the handle, Shae moved with all her Strength-fueled speed, darting across the hall into a room containing the vending and ice machines. Pressing herself out of sight against the wall, she heard Rostof leave his room and stride down the hall, not back toward the lobby elevators, but in the opposite direction, toward the emergency exit stairwell at the back of the building.

Shae debated with herself. Rostof's heart rate was elevated and his energy agitated; she had Perceived that easily enough when he passed by her hiding place. He might be hasty and nervous for any number of reasons. She had no personal interest in the foreigner, no reason to confront him. Yet, all of her training and instincts as a Green Bone told her to be suspicious.

Shae scowled. Hilo would not hesitate to act on what his gut told him.

That was not, she reminded herself, necessarily a good thing.

She followed the foreigner. She could move much faster than him if she wished to, but the skirt suit and high heels still slowed her down. Straining her Perception down the stairs as she hurried after him, she sensed the man reach the ground floor and exit the building.

The metal door at the bottom led her outside into a loading zone behind the hotel, where two kitchen staff members were taking a smoke break next to a parked delivery truck. They looked at her curiously as she buttoned her blazer and walked past them as if nothing was unusual. She caught a glimpse of Rostof's back; he'd changed out of his business attire and was now dressed casually in plain trousers, a brown wool coat and square felt hat, and he was carrying an office worker's black briefcase that he had not had with him at the conference.

Dusk had fallen quickly while she was at the tradeshow reception, and although the streetlights of Janloon burned bright over the uninterrupted bustle of the city, Shae quickly lost sight of the man she was tailing. She concentrated instead on keeping him in her Perception, but that was harder to do outside, with the swirling background energies of so many other people. Old Town was a vibrant but motley historical neighborhood crisscrossed by narrow alleyways. Most of the squat, clay-roofed brick buildings dated to before the Many Nations War, and some of them still didn't have electric heating or telephone service. Disappearing in this labyrinthine part of town was easy. At a street corner a block and a half away, Shae lost her quarry. She stopped, turning in a circle and scanning intently, but she could no longer see or sense him.

Far stronger in her Perception now were the jade auras of two Green Bones sitting in a car parked nearby along the curb. Shae walked over to the sedan, a black Cabriola Swift, and tapped on the driver side window. The young man in the seat rolled down the glass and gave her a quizzical look before startling with recognition. Quickly, he got out of the car and touched his forehead to her respectfully. "You're Hilo-jen's sister," he exclaimed. The Green Bone was near Shae's age, with striking gray eyes, jade pierced through both his ears and a jade pendant around his neck. "Is there a problem? Do you need help?"

His fellow Finger in the passenger seat called out, "What's going on, Eiten?"

"Get out of the car, Vuay. It's Hilo-jen's sister."

Hilo-jen's sister. Kaul Sen's granddaughter. Someday, Shae promised herself sourly, people would call her by her own name instead of recognizing her in relation to the men of her family. One day, they would address her properly as Kaul-jen, as they did her brothers. That day was not today. "Nothing's wrong," she assured the concerned Finger. "I just left a business conference in the Crown Summit Hotel. Did either of you see a tall, yellow-haired foreigner with a beard walk past here carrying a briefcase a couple of minutes ago?"

Eiten and Vuay nodded. "He went around the corner up there," Eiten said.

"Where does that street lead?" Shae asked.

Vuay shrugged. “Nowhere. It goes into the parking lot of that empty building.”

Thank the gods that the clan’s warriors were trained to be alert and observant and to know every piece of their territory. Shae thanked the men and began to walk away, but Eiten took a step into her path. “Why do you need to find that foreigner so badly?” he asked. “Did he cause some sort of trouble for you? Did anything happen at the conference?”

“No, nothing, I told you I’m fine,” Shae said, impatient to try and catch up with Rostof before she lost him for good. “I was talking to him, but he began acting strangely and left.”

“It’s dark, and this isn’t a very good area, Shae-jen,” said Eiten. So he knew her name after all. “A lot of Abukei live here. Most of them are no trouble, but some are thieves and smugglers. If you want to talk to this man, let me and Vuay find him and bring him to you.”

“Should we call Hilo-jen?” Vuay suggested to Eiten.

“That’s not necessary,” Shae snapped, more harshly than she meant to, considering that the Fingers were trying to be helpful. The last thing she needed was for her brother to show up. Hilo would stride onto the scene, ask pointed questions, grin at her, and drive her home as if he were doing his little sister a favor. “Stay here and keep an eye out for the foreigner in case he comes back this way. Don’t interfere with him, just see what he does.”

She left the two Fingers standing by the car, looking after her in confusion. Perhaps she should’ve enlisted their help in finding Rostof. Three Green Bones could surely track the man more easily than one. But it wasn’t as if she could explain that she was tailing Rostof because her Shoto-Espenian boyfriend’s colleague from ROE military intelligence had identified him as a person of interest.

Once she was out of sight from Eiten and Vuay, Shae pulled off her black pumps and began to run. Calling upon Strength and Lightness, she dodged pedestrians, bicycles, and vehicles. She would have a better chance of spotting the Ygutanian from a higher vantage point. Sucking in a breath along with her jade energy, she bounded Light off a parked truck onto the rusted metal railing of a second-story balcony, then off a brick wall and onto the roof of a cheap bathhouse. Running across the clay tiles presented a challenge of balance and nimbleness worthy of some of the Lightness tests

she'd been given at Kaul Dushuron Academy. She heard people on the street below exclaim in surprise and point up at her—not because of what she was doing, as Janlooners were accustomed to the sight of Green Bones employing jade abilities, but because most of the time the Green Bones running on rooftops were not women in business attire and stockings, carrying a purse in one hand and their shoes in the other.

Shae reached the end of the roof and leapt again, Lightness propelling her onto the flat roof of a higher neighboring building. Another calculated hurdle took her out of sight of the people on the street before she could be recognized. Vuay had been correct: There was a small parking lot at the end of the street, directly in the shadow of the building Shae was standing upon. Catching her breath as she slowed to a walk, Shae approached the edge of the roof and leaned over it cautiously. This time, she spotted Rostof before she Perceived him. Ten meters below, the foreigner was walking toward a parked car, a compact silver Tezzo.

As Shae watched, two men got out of the waiting car. She couldn't see their faces clearly, but one of them was Kekonese. The other was darker, perhaps Abukei or Uwiwan. The meeting place had apparently been chosen for its seclusion; there were no other people around.

Shae crouched, watching the men, her stockinged feet cold on the dirty concrete of the rooftop. She couldn't hear the words that were exchanged, but from the tense, wary body language of the men, it seemed they were strangers to each other. Rostof handed over the black briefcase. The Kekonese man placed it on the hood of the car and opened it. He extracted a bundled set of bills and flipped through it, counting the money. Apparently satisfied, he placed the cash back in the briefcase, shut it, and said something to his partner, who brought out an identical briefcase from the trunk of their car and set it in front of Rostof. The Ygutanian laid the container on the ground and opened it just enough to peer inside before nodding and shutting it again.

The Kekonese man, Shae noticed, had not touched the briefcase from the trunk. Rostof picked it up by the handle, holding it away from his own body and straining slightly from the weight. It was possible she was witnessing a drug deal or weapons sale, but Shae would wager that the briefcase Rostof carried was lined with lead and filled with jade.



SHE WOULD NOT be out here at all were it not for the Espenians, who had offered to reward her simply for information. She had plenty of that now, an eyewitness account more damning than anything she'd imagined when she'd walked into the conference that evening. Jerald, if he knew where she was right now, would be astonished and worried; he would tell her to leave immediately and return to the safety of her family's home. She had no intention of doing so, but imagining her boyfriend's concern made Shae smile a little in the dark.

She was a Green Bone of the No Peak clan. Jade smugglers were even lower than thieves, their crimes an offense against the clan and against society, their lives worth less than nothing.

She was alone, and the men were undoubtedly armed. She did not have a moon blade or a gun, only a compact talon knife in her purse. Shae cursed her foolishness as she wasted precious seconds digging into her bag, vowing to herself that from this day forward she would always carry her knife on her body where it was easily accessible. She dumped the handbag's contents onto the roof, spilling her wallet, keys, and makeup. The sheathed talon knife tumbled out next to the coasters and flashlight she'd picked up from the AgriKekon Conference.

Shae seized the talon knife, and in a flash of inspiration, the flashlight as well. Rostof had turned away, and the other two men were placing the briefcase of cash in the trunk of the Tezzo. Shae turned on the flashlight and pointed it straight at them, aiming for the eyes of the Kekonese man. Momentarily blinded, the smuggler jerked away with a startled exclamation. As he yanked a pistol from his waistband, Shae shouted commandingly, "Rostof! Now! Shoot them both!"

Rostof whirled, astonished and alarmed to hear his name being yelled from the rooftop. Seeing the Kekonese man with a drawn pistol, Rostof dropped the heavy briefcase and reached frantically inside his jacket.

The smuggler's eyes flew wide. Before Rostof could pull his own weapon, three panicked shots rang out, pumping three bullets into the Ygutanian's chest.

Rostof stumbled back in disbelief and collapsed to the pavement.

“Fucking ’gut bastard sold us out!” the Kekonese man snarled, loudly enough for Shae to hear him. He waved the gun at Rostof’s prone body. “He was going to kill us.”

“He’s got a friend on the roof of the building,” his partner shouted.

The smuggler unloaded two shots in Shae’s direction, which went so wide that she didn’t even need to Deflect them. “Grab the jade, quick. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

The Abukei man bolted forward and dragged the briefcase away from the growing pool of blood around Rostof’s body. He heaved it back into the car next to the identical one full of cash and slammed the trunk. The two men jumped into the car and started the engine.

Shae launched herself over the edge of the roof and dropped like a rock. Her stomach flew up into her chest and her heart sailed into her throat. An awful, terrifying instant of doubt: If she misjudged, even her jade abilities were not going to save her from serious injury or death when she hit the pavement at full speed and was run over by the smugglers in their car.

She did not misjudge. With a surge of Steel, she landed on the hood of the silver Tezzo with the impact of a cannonball, buckling the metal and driving the front of the car into the ground with a squealing crunch.

The men inside screamed. It seemed even jade smugglers, who knew to expect death if caught, were unprepared for the sight of a woman dropping out of the sky onto their car like a demon. As the driver aimed his gun at Shae’s silhouette and pulled the trigger, she sent a sustained blast of Deflection directly at the windshield. Multiple shots shattered the glass. The diverted shards and bullets were hurled inward, back into the vehicle. They punched into the driver’s body, slamming him into the seat and tearing a dozen holes into his chest, neck, arms, and face. He slumped sideways against the door.

Despite bleeding from a dozen glass cuts, the Abukei man nevertheless had the wherewithal to open the door and roll out onto the asphalt. He scrambled to his feet and ran without looking back, his fear one continuous blare in Shae’s Perception. It was entirely possible that he’d never wanted to take part in the crime, but every jade smuggling outfit needed a jade-immune Abukei or stone-eye to safely handle and transport the contraband. Sometimes they were lured, bribed, threatened, or blackmailed into participation. In the few seconds that Shae hesitated to give chase, the

fleeing man reached the street at the end of the parking lot, where a speed-blurred figure, moving as only a heavily jaded Green Bone was capable of moving, intercepted him and took his head off his shoulders.

Shae watched the smuggler's decapitated body drop to the ground in the orange pool of light under one of the streetlamps. A few passersby gasped and stared, giving the scene a wide berth. Eiten took a square of cloth from his pocket and wiped the white length of his moon blade before sheathing it. "Shae-jen," he called out worriedly as he jogged up to her. "Vuay and I decided we ought to follow you. Are you all right?"



COMING DOWN OFF the surge of jade energy she'd expended made Shae momentarily light-headed; after jumping off the hood of the ruined car, she swayed and briefly steadied herself against the door. Her stockings were torn and she had lost her shoes. With an annoyed groan, she remembered they were on the roof along with the spilled contents of her purse. She didn't have any desire or energy to use Lightness to get back up there.

Vuay offered to retrieve her belongings while Eiten opened the driver's side door of the silver Tezzo and unceremoniously dragged the smuggler's body from the vehicle, dumping it on the ground. The Finger removed the keys from the ignition and opened the trunk. Breaking into the top suitcase, they found a jumble of raw and cut jade—some of it scavenged, some of it no doubt stolen. Unpolished rocks of various sizes, rings and watches, belt buckles, much of it flawed or damaged. It wasn't as much as Shae had expected, and not of high enough quality to meet the standards of most Green Bones. Not worth three men giving up their lives.

Astonishingly, Rostof was still alive. When Shae approached and stood over him, slow recognition crawled across the sky-blue eyes, fogged over with pain. "You?" he wheezed. Blood bubbled out of his mouth. "You, nice girl from the conference, why...?" The Ygutanian's gaze traveled from her face to her neck and came to rest on the jade she'd hidden under the scarf when they had met in the Crown Summit Hotel only a few hours ago. Regretfully, she couldn't recall where she'd dropped that scarf, perhaps on the roof of the bathhouse.

Shae crouched next to the dying man. Bullets had torn into his gut and collapsed a lung, but perhaps he could be saved if he was rushed to a hospital. The Espenians might wish for this Ygutanian to live, so they could learn more about his past activities and connections.

On Kekon, however, there were two crimes, the two absolute lowest forms of theft, that were always punished by immediate execution: grave robbing and jade smuggling. Shae unsheathed her talon knife and slashed deep across the side of Rostof's neck. Bright arterial blood flowed down his collar and soaked his brown jacket. The pale energy she'd been watching in her mind all evening faded away in seconds. "I'm sorry you didn't get to see more of Janloon after all, Mr. Rostof," Shae whispered sadly. "But I think you saw enough of it."



GRANDDA THREW SHAE a birthday party on the Kaul estate and awarded her many new pieces of jade, which he had custom designed into a beautiful and expensive two-tier choker. He bragged to his friends and cronies that his granddaughter was so green she followed a suspicious foreigner out of a business conference and single-handedly caught and killed three jade smugglers in the middle of a deal. "Shae-se, my best grandson," he crowed.

Even the creaky old-timers touched their foreheads and bent into salutes when they saw her displaying her new green. "Far do your enemies flee, Shae-jen," they murmured through tight smiles.

Shae accepted the congratulations graciously, basking in her grandfather's adulation. She did not point out that the foreigner had been shot by the smugglers he was doing business with, or that the clan's Fingers, Eiten and Vuay, had fortunately been there to help. Hilo could choose to reward his men if he wished to. Kaul Sen had never thrown a party over any of his grandsons' accomplishments. The fact that Shae was feted and recognized when Hilo had probably caught and dispatched ten times the number of jade smugglers without any parental fanfare made Shae smug and proud. Yet afterward, alone, looking at herself in the mirror wearing her radiant new jade choker, she was strangely, unreasonably doubtful.

She hadn't enjoyed killing Rostof and the other men, but neither did she feel any remorse; she'd done what was required of a Green Bone warrior. Any good Fist or Finger would've done the same. She was being celebrated for her actions because they had *not* been expected of her, a twenty-three-year-old woman being groomed to work with Yun Doru in the Weather Man's office. She was the youngest of the Kauls and her grandfather's favorite, the one grandchild who did not have to live in the shadow of a heroic father who'd died while she was in the womb. She excelled so greatly because the bar was lower.

Shae told herself that Grandda's favor did not diminish her greenness. Nevertheless, it was galling that Hilo didn't seem to begrudge her achievement. Not a single snide or condescending remark, not a hint of jealousy. He was too busy; he had a new girlfriend—a stone-eye woman, surely *that* relationship wouldn't last long—and now that he was a senior Fist, he had more Fingers to manage. No matter how much jade Kaul Sen awarded to his granddaughter, no matter how many parties he threw for her or how much he bragged about his “best grandson” to his friends, he could not, even as the Pillar of the clan, give her true greenness, the simple respect accorded by and to men, friends and enemies alike, honestly earned.



“**HOW IN SEER'S** holy Truth did you get this?” Eli Sterns stared at Shae in wonder.

The thick brown envelope that Shae had passed across the table to the ROE agent contained Helvan eya Rostof's wallet and identification, his passport, a slim red address book with names and phone numbers, plane tickets for a privately chartered flight to Dramsk, and various documents written in the Ygut language that she couldn't decipher.

“Rostof is dead,” Shae explained. “After the conference, he tried to buy jade illegally, but the deal was interrupted by patrolling Green Bones. The smugglers panicked and shot him. When I found out what happened, I managed to get into his hotel room and search it.”

She had taken the dead man's hotel key from his jacket pocket and used it to enter room 410 in the Crown Summit Hotel. The Janloon police did

not investigate clan executions, and No Peak had no interest in the man. Foreign or not, he was just another dead smuggler.

They were back on the patio of the Goodtimes Bistro. The weather had cooled in the past few weeks and the vast Amaric Ocean that separated Kekon from the rest of the world was flat and gray. The seabirds were numerous and squabbling today, gulls and cormorants and petrels crowding the shore.

Eli Sterns took a large swallow of black coffee, closed the envelope, and sat back in his chair, holding the gift Shae had presented to him carefully in his lap, as if it were expensive and breakable. She could see the Espenian's thoughts churning. "This is valuable stuff," he said at last. ROE military intelligence could use the information to trace Rostof's connections and perhaps better understand the relationship between Ygutan's state apparatus and criminal elements. The agent raised his head, staring at Shae and her new jade choker as if seeing her up close for the first time. "I didn't think Rostof was going to get himself killed," he said slowly, running a hand through his curly hair, "but I have to admit, I also didn't think that anything would come out of asking you to talk to him at the conference. Maybe a few interesting details, but not...all this."

Jerald laughed. Impulsively, he brought the back of Shae's hand to his lips and gave it a loud kiss. "That's my girl, always full of surprises. One day, you're going to show me what you can do with all that jade you wear, right?" He leaned in suggestively and lowered his voice. "Maybe tonight?"

Shae blushed, thinking about the evening ahead. If her family ever questioned her visits to Euman Island, she was going to explain them away as important language immersion opportunities. It was not even a lie. She was already taking advanced classes in Espenian and working toward becoming fluent in the language. Even if she didn't go overseas, the skill would ultimately be valuable to the clan, considering that the ROE was Kekon's largest trading partner.

Sterns squinted at Jerald. "Crumb, I have no idea what a woman like her sees in a sap like you, but I'm sure glad you two found each other." He asked the waitress for the check. "Lunch is on me, again, I insist. It's the least I could do. But I'd like to do much more." Like Jerald, his eyes were on Shae alone, but the intense interest in his gaze was an entirely different type of desire. "The ROE wants to do business properly in Kekon. You two

lovebirds are a perfect example of how our countries can find a lot in common.” He leaned forward. “Shae, I can make sure you’re paid well for assisting us. If you’re still serious about studying in Espenia, we can make that happen, too.”

Kaul Sen, the Torch of Kekon, had rewarded her with jade and praised her before the entire clan. Yet, Jerald’s ignorant but wholehearted affection, and the admiration of this agent, Sterns, who was still largely a stranger, was unexpectedly satisfying to Shae in a completely different way. Perhaps an even better way. No one in No Peak knew of it. It came from outside the clan and had none of her grandfather’s or brothers’ fingerprints on it.

Shae fingered her new jade choker. The gemstones streamed bright energy into her body and the shape of the talon knife strapped to the small of her back under her coat pressed gently against her spine as she sat back and sipped the bitter, foreign black coffee that she was developing a taste for. She could sense no other jade auras nearby. Perhaps, at this moment, she was the only Green Bone warrior to be found on this small, foreign-controlled island.

Shae had looked up the unfamiliar Espenian word that Eli Sterns had used before: *asset*. She knew now that its meaning was somewhat different than what he had explained. Assets were not merely loyal friends; they were valuable belongings. She was an asset to her grandfather and to her clan. These Espenian men, she thought, could be her assets.

“I would like that, Eli,” Shae said, giving him a closemouthed smile.

Sterns surprised her by clasping his hands together and touching them to his forehead in a traditional Kekonese salute before saying, in Kekonese, “Thank you, Kaul-jen.” Lowering his hands and returning to speaking in Espenian, he said, “You’ll need a code name, one that we’ll use for confidential communication from now on, something unique to you.”

Shae gazed out at the black birds far from shore, captive yet flying free, diving into the sea and surfacing triumphant with their throats full of fish. “What about ‘Cormorant’?”



I wrote “Granddaughter Cormorant” exclusively for this collection, out of a desire to examine the unanswered questions and seeming contradictions of Shae’s past and who

she was before she left Kekon to study abroad. Clearly, she came back a changed woman in Jade City, but what was she like before she left? Shae is the favored granddaughter of the Kaul family, the top student of her graduating class, a skilled and heavily jade Green Bone warrior, yet she pursues a secret, forbidden relationship with a foreign soldier, becomes a paid informer for the Republic of Espenia, and as we all know by now, dramatically falls out with her family, takes off her jade, and flees the country for two years. One wonders: How did she earn her jade? Why did she decide to work with the Espenian military? How did she view her brothers, her place in the clan, her own goals?

This story is the most plot-heavy and self-contained of the collection, with a specific mission, new characters, and the now familiar geopolitical background of foreign powers operating in Kekon. We also finally get to see Jerald. Shae is at her most formidable, but at this point in her life, she's also insecure and fixated on a one-sided rivalry with Hilo, trying to determine how to earn respect as a Green Bone woman at a time with few role models. Yet even now, there are unmistakable glimmers of the shrewd and farsighted Weather Man she will later become.

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AUTHOR BIO

FONDA LEE'S EPIC fantasy Green Bone Saga, consisting of *Jade City*, *Jade War*, *Jade Legacy*, and the prequel novella *The Jade Setter of Janloon*, won the World Fantasy Award and the Locus Award, was nominated for the Nebula and Hugo Awards, has been translated into multiple languages, and was named to TIME Magazine's Top 100 Fantasy Books of All Time. Lee is also the author of the acclaimed young adult science fiction novels *Zeroboxer*, *Exo* and *Cross Fire*, and the fantasy novella *Untethered Sky*. A former corporate strategist and black belt martial artist, she currently resides in the Pacific Northwest. www.fondalee.com

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